Ghosts of the Black Atlantic

Hauntology and the Temporality of Justice in Black British Poetry

Judith Tesfaye Kiros

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

English

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Abstract

This study examines the works of four black British poets and their engagement with mourning, spectrality, and ethics, drawing on Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) and his concept of hauntology. It argues that hauntology, as it is often applied in British writing on literature, music, and film, often prioritises the relationship between the past and present while neglecting its future-oriented and ethical aspects. This popularised framework, the study contends, often marginalises black British writers, even when their work directly addresses Britain's imperial history and the syncretic, spectral cultures it continues to produce. By reasserting Derrida's idea of justice in the future-to-come, the study situates these poets within the dynamic, diasporic space Paul Gilroy terms the *black Atlantic*, exploring how they engage with ghostly pasts and future possibilities. Beginning with Jay Bernard's *The Red and Yellow Nothing* (2016), the study develops a mode of reading – called a *spectral poetics of relation* – in conversation with Édouard Glissant. It then applies this method to Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974), demonstrating how his work enacts a spectral slippage between page and stage. Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* (2008) reveals Derrida's "visor effect," in which the spectre sees without being seen, and employs a call-and-response structure reject individuality in favour of fugitivity. In Maud Sulter's *As a Blackwoman* (1985) and *Zabat* (1989), Sulter creates justice for black women in the hauntological sense, as a relationship between generations. Finally, Jay Bernard's *Surge* (2019) releases the dead, contained in the archives, through poetry. Based on these readings, the study argues that a Black British hauntology offers a space for imagining new futures, even in a present preoccupied with the past.

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Following the Ghost

> "What does it mean to follow a ghost?"
> – Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1994)

In Bristol, once a central port in the British slave trade, a statue of the slaver Edward Colston was toppled and then thrown into the waters of the harbour in June of 2020 (Wall). Bristol-based poet Vanessa Kisuule responded to Colston's literal deplatforming with verse; her poem "Hollow," at turns gleeful and sombre, mocks the statue's plaque ("[w]ise and virtuous the plaque assured us") while reflecting on the way in which public commemoration sanitizes histories of racial and economic oppression (Kisuule). While symbolically meaningful, Kisuule suggests, overthrowing Colston's statue does little to change the way in which his trade materially shaped Bristol and, by extension, Britain: "Each bougie building we flaunt/ haunted by bones." In Kisuule's poem, the entire city is haunted, and the ghosts that inhabit it are profoundly, physically present.

Importantly, Kisuule also makes an explicit link between the history of slavery and the horrific 2020 murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black American man, who was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis. A video exposing that murder went viral, spreading across the US and the world, and reignited the protest movement Black Lives Matter. The movement, too, became a transnational phenomenon, functioning both as a show of solidarity with black Americans and as a framework for addressing the racial injustices faced by black people in their disparate national contexts (Adams). Despite the strict lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in the UK in response to the moment – and, in Bristol, Colston's statue was finally wrested from its plinth.

Floyd, who is absent from the poem, died when a man knelt on his neck for nine minutes; in Kisuule's version, that death is blithely visited on the slaver, who receives a "[s]tanding ovation on the platform of [his] neck," and, promises Kisuule, "there is more to come." The ghosts that haunt Bristol – enslaved Africans and the wealth they were forced to accumulate – are not contained to the city. They manifest in

the racially motivated murder of Floyd, but also in and through the actions of protesters, who pull down the statue of another murderer, from another time. Ghosts, it seems, have a way of turning us towards the past, while also unfurling new spatiotemporal and ethico-political vistas.

If ghosts can encourage us to face past atrocities and imagine potential redress – the *more to come* that Kisuule hints at – it makes them apposite figures for thinking about histories of racial subjection and their ongoing affective and material reverberations. This study examines the works of four black British writers who, through their poetry, excavate bones and stir up spirits. In doing so, they trouble distinctions between past and present, here and elsewhere, to reaffirm the ways in which the living are always already entangled with the dead. That entanglement also, they show, necessitates taking responsibility for the dead, and acting with and for them. For that reason, my theoretical point of departure is Jacques Derrida's *hauntology*, as developed in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994).

Because the first chapter of this study is dedicated to my reading of Derridean hauntology, I will address it only briefly in this introduction. Hauntology does not necessarily involve a belief in ghosts or the supernatural; rather, it implies that our knowledge of what is solid, present and real is contingent upon a series of intangible, absent, but haunting others. Every act of revelation, of showing forth, is also an act of suppression – but the spectre of what has been suppressed lingers. With basis in that understanding, *Specters of Marx* launches an attack on the notion that the seeming triumph of liberal democracy over communism after the collapse of the Soviet Union – famously heralded as the end of history by political scientist Francis Fukuyama – means that Marx and Marxism have been conclusively defeated. On the contrary, Derrida reasons, the promise made by Marxism – freedom, justice, an end to alienation – continues to haunt us. Derrida relates that Marxist promise to *the messianic promise*, that which is awaited and longed for, but can never arrive.[1] It can only exist *as* a promise, and, in doing so, it maintains the dimension of the future.

[1] The messianic is discussed in more detail in chapters one and two.

In Derrida's conception, the absent, haunting other – the spectre who both is and is not there – must be taken seriously as an ally and agent. If we do not, as he puts it, "live *with* ghosts," in the "company, or the companionship" with ghosts, then no future is possible (*Specters* xviii). Through the spectre, we understand ourselves as existing in relation to that which is not wholly present, but nevertheless acts, and which we have an ethical and political obligation towards. Hauntology, then, is ultimately a question of justice, of acknowledging our responsibility towards that absent-and-present other, including the dead and those not yet born. At the same time, the messianic promise ensures an openness towards what must and will come, which is both looked for and impossible to anticipate. Derrida calls this aporetic structure "the very place of spectrality," and, beautifully, imagines our relationship to it as one of "hospitality without reserve" (*Specters* 83). Perhaps to follow a ghost involves being led, by a barely-felt hand, towards a horizon that beckons as it retreats.

Viewing justice, ethics and politics in spectral terms allows us to look beyond the seeming stability of the present moment and into history – to see the bones in the bougie buildings, to borrow Kisuule's trenchant phrase. At the same time, it confronts us with our duty to the future, the time to come. What do we *do* about the bones? And what do they, in their turn, conceal from us (but may reveal to others)? It is my contention that hauntology, as it is often understood and applied in and about Britain and British literature, often neglects hauntology's emphasis on the future, and its concomitant concern for justice as an active and generative process.[2] Instead, hauntology's scope tends to be geographically and temporally limited, to the British Isles and the past, and hauntology is often conflated with or compared to a form of subversive melancholia or politically resonant nostalgia.

A consequence of this interpretation of hauntology is that it excludes cultural and racial others, for whom the past holds less nostalgia, subversive or otherwise; as the poet Linton Kwesi Johnson states in an interview, "We come into the Mother country and were treated like fucking third class citizens you know what I mean? We were

[2] I dedicate part of chapter one to an overview and critique of relevant texts in the field.

marginalized" (Lowndes). Another, related consequence is that what constitutes Britain and Britishness becomes limited, its imperial history (and imperialist present) repressed in favour of a more insular, introspective turn.

By looking specifically at the ways in which black British poets summon and sit with the spectres of racial, gendered and economic oppressions, I try to reemphasise what I see as hauntology's central traits: its orientation towards the future as well as towards the past; its commitment to justice for those who are not presently alive to claim it; and, finally, the messianic as a way of imagining the *relationship* between temporality and justice. With that, I also hope to expand the conversation on hauntology to engage with Britain's past as depicted by authors from its former colonies.

Here, it should be noted that I expand on my reason for focusing on poetry in chapter two. Briefly, I find that there are parallels between spectrality and poetry in the play between absence and presence, the destabilisation of chronological time, and the way in which meaning deliberately proliferates, expands and never wholly manifests. Following from that, and by reading Derrida alongside philosopher Édouard Glissant, I propose a method of reading I dub *a spectral poetics of relation*. It is not a deconstructive reading, though hauntology indubitably operates according to a deconstructive logic; rather, it views the text through Glissant's poetics of relation, exposing the cracks where the ghost enters and the reader may follow.

I will return to my choice of authors – Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jackie Kay, Maud Sulter and Jay Bernard – presently. Now, however, I want to address other spirits – those of blackness in Britain – and contextualise my use of blackness as a politically motivated, racialized and racializing term, as well as the fields of study dedicated to it.

Spirits of Blackness in Britain

What kind of spirit enters when blackness is called on? Which ideological and discursive ceremonies does it manifest through? In the case of this study, I use it to refer demographically to peoples from the African diaspora, including from the Caribbean, which is not wholly

unproblematic. Before explaining the reasoning behind my choice, I want to discuss the permutations and transformations of the term in Britain.

In a British context, *black* and *black power* have applied to and been employed by people from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, primarily during the late sixties to the mid-to-late-eighties. "When various peoples – of Asian, African, and Caribbean descent – interpellated themselves and each other as /black/ they invoked a collective identity predicated on political and not biological similarities," explains art historian Kobena Mercer, pointing out that, significantly, this *political* gesture decoupled blackness from race, thereby denaturalising the racist discourse that conflated them (291). The work of activist and writer Ambalavaner Sivanandan, who came to England from Ceylon in the late 50s, was fundamental in organising and documenting the black struggle in Britain. On being hired as chief librarian by the Institute of Race Relations in the 1960s, Sivanandan was key in gradually reformulating its theoretical basis: from the issue of race relations to racism as a question of power, tied to imperialist and capitalist exploitation (Owusu 455-6). His essays – many of which were originally published in the Institute of Race Relations' outspokenly anti-imperialist, anti-racist journal *Race & Class* – have been collected in *A Different Hunger: Writings on the Black Resistance* (1982) and *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism* (1990).

Another central figure, who wrote and published extensively about blackness in Britain, is cultural theorist Stuart Hall. The groundbreaking, co-authored study *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978) analyses the state's role in the racialisation of crime and the attendant manufacturing of a moral panic to justify an authoritarian expansion of the state's capacities. Sociologist and cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, too, is indispensable to the conversation on racism in Britain and beyond, with classics in the field such as *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in '70s Britain* (1982), which he co-authored, *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), and *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993).[3] *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (1985), written by the

[3] Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy are also known for helping to develop British cultural studies as an academic field.

socialist and feminist Brixton Black Women's Group, but credited to members Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, offers a valuable insight into black women's organising; so do the texts collected in *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (1997), edited by Heidi Safia Mirza.

Mirza writes, in the introduction to *Black British Feminism*, about *being black* in Britain as *becoming racialized*. It is a political identity embraced as part of "a process of consciousness," a "self-consciously constructed space where identity is not inscribed by a natural identification but a political kinship" (4). But, she adds, sceptics viewed it as eliding differences in experiences, cultures and class. In 1991, for example, Stuart Hall famously announced the end of the "essential black subject," proposing that this subject, as constructed through cultural and political discourse, obscured people of Asian origin, women, and others ("Old and New Identities" 77-8). Sivanandan also acknowledged that a shift occurred in the mid-eighties, but was, unlike Hall, deeply critical of it. For Sivanandan, the fragmentation of black unity happened by way of multiculturalism and the incorporation of black politics into the state: "In effect, it transferred Black politics from the streets to the town halls," pitting groups against one another for representation and access to funding (Owusu 460). Blackness had been able to bring together a multiplicity of voices, identities and ideologies, and been a remarkably efficient banner under which to organise; but its plasticity, it seems, was not without a breaking point.

To return to the question of blackness in this study, there are a few reasons why I choose that terminology in relation to the poets studied, and limit its use to people of African descent. First, I am mindful of the fact that, as Michael Eldridge proposed in 1997, "[as] a strategic coalition, an imagined community, a public sphere, black Britain fell to pieces a decade or more ago" and now signifies differently (34). Second, I use the term partly in reference to Paul Gilroy's *black Atlantic*, a concept that centres the ship as a chronotope, he writes, to "focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts" (4).

To clarify, my aim is not to conflate blackness and Africanness, but to explore how these poets situate themselves, history, and the future with reference to the twin outrages that were the transatlantic

slave trade and colonialism within a British imperial past and neocolonial present. Moreover, I agree with Steve Blevins suggestion in *Living Cargo: How Black Britain Performs its Past* (2016) that certain black writers have moved away from narratives of immigration and belonging, to narratives that "[historicize] postcolonial migrations within the long colonial past" (12). I would offer a counter-suggestion, too, in that Blevins dates this turn to artists working since "the late 1980s and early '90s to the present," a cut-off point that strikes me as somewhat arbitrary. Indeed, Linton Kwesi Johnson's first published work, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, certainly qualifies as one of the "creative practices and expressive forms that engage[s] the public in a conversation about the legacy of colonialism [...] in the contemporary postcolonial and postimperial world" that Blevins identifies as marking that turn (12) – but was first performed in 1973.

In addition, I would make the claim that the division is not necessarily generational, but ideological – although, naturally, I concur that the development of capitalism since the 1970s, such as the entrenchment of neoliberalism and new modes of imperialist domination, have affected the ways in which race is articulated and struggled over. What I mean is that a certain understanding of blackness fundamentally hinges on the interaction between, for example, local racisms and global colonialisms.

Questions of identity and belonging, then, are *already* situated within a broader context of enforced and racialised labour exploitation and colonial resource extraction. One would be hard-pressed not to see that Johnson's poems, often set in Britain, consistently point to interlocking systems of capitalist oppression; the local, then, does not preclude the global, but connects them. Johnson, of course, came of age during what Rob Waters calls the period of "thinking black," when political exchanges between "the U.S. civil rights movement, Caribbean and African decolonization, and the politics of race relations and immigration" brought together heterogenous communities in the fight against racism (92). He was a member of the British Black Panther Party (an example of the way in which movements, too, travel across the black Atlantic) and organised with the Brixton-based Race Today

Collective, which published a magazine he frequently wrote for.[4] One contributor to that magazine was legendary Marxist historian and political activist C.L.R. James, who also, on occasion, collaborated with the Panthers (Bunce and Field 410). I mention this to underline how the transnational, long historical view – the interest in historicizing "within the long colonial past" (Blevins 12) – became inscribed into blackness, and is often (but variously) expressed through poets who think and *write* black.

Another reason for using black in my discussion of these writers is, of course, that they use it themselves. While Johnson eventually, as Eldridge explains, "withdrew from black Britain," he was (and is still regarded as) one of its most venerated pioneers (38). Kay describes the thrill of recognition she felt on joining a black women's writing group in 1981, reading Audre Lorde for the first time, and recognising herself in Lorde's work ("Let It Be Told" 533-4). In Kay's poem "So you think I am a Mule," published in 1984, the narrator tells her prying, white interlocutor: "I'm going to my black sisters," because "if we know no home/we know one thing:/we are black;/ we're at home with that" (80).

Sulter, a contemporary of Kay's, was even more outspoken about wanting to centre blackness, black women, and the political and erotic love between black women in her politics and art. She, too, has that transhistorical, transnational view of blackness, writing: "Throughout the same Black Triangle where one hundred million died in slavery days, too many are dying of this epidemic [AIDS] of many which includes our rape, our murder, our poverty, and our criminalization" ("Call and Response" 601). Bernard is less explicit, but *Surge* is deeply concerned with the history of blackness in Britain, tying the New Cross fire to the Grenfell Tower fire by way of slavery, migration and colonialism. On being asked about their relationship to the term black British, Bernard has responded: "For me the Black is the status bit and the British bit is the condition in which I live" (Massana and Alsina Rísquez 244). All four poets, then, refer to themselves as black in a sense that also charges blackness with a particular history and set of political ideas.

[4] Many of the key contributions to Race Today have been gathered in the anthology *Here to Stay, Here to Fight* (2019), published by Pluto Press.

It should also be noted that there are several influential and important books about black history in Britain that use the term black to trace the settlement of people in Britain either from Africa and the Caribbean, or from Africa, Asian and the Caribbean. In writing that history, there is (and has to be) an acknowledgment of the fact that racial formation extends beyond self-identification, political and otherwise. In contemporary Britain, most people would recognise black simply as referring to African diasporas – although, as Rob Waters points out, "this apparently settled and self-evident meaning of blackness is a relatively new historical development" (4). In one of the foundational texts of black British historiography, Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984), *black* includes people of South Asian descent. The same is true for Ron Ramdin's influential *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (1987). But a recently published work, historian Hakim Adi's acclaimed *African and Caribbean People in Britain: A History*, avoids the use of black altogether, with Adi expressing his reluctance to deny people their specific geographic, cultural and familial ties (vii).

The poets I analyse in this study are attuned to and interested in making partially present and visible certain absences, gaps, and invisibilities. After all, where there is a ghost, there must have been some body, and a hand that administered the poison or held the rope. But that is not to say that the past is their primary focus; rather, it is the spectral friction produced by the past in contact with a liberatory, longed for future. As Waters puts it, "black radical imaginaries [...] stretched forward into the future" by articulating the past as "explosive, emotive, lived time, combining memory as a private, relived experience, with a lived form of historical time" (219-220). In this relationship to the past and the future, there is, I contend, precisely that hauntological form of ethics that Derrida puts forward: a duty and an attraction towards that which is not (yet, not quite, perhaps not ever) here.

Before moving onto the literature, I want to briefly explain a concept I reference at some points throughout this study, and which permeates much of the analysis: racial capitalism. The term was first used by South African Marxists Martin Legassick and David Hemson, who sought to explain how and why South African capitalism and apartheid mutually reinforced one another, but is perhaps most often attributed

to Cedric Robinson and his *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983). For Robinson, the relationship of the proletariat to the means of production was not, and never had been, universal; instead, pre-existing European racisms were rearticulated in and through capitalism throughout its development. That is how capitalism can sustain several types of labour – such as waged labour and slave labour – simultaneously, in that racial differentiation becomes the logic whereby one's relationship to the means of production is determined.

My own understanding of the term aligns more closely with that formulated by Stuart Hall in "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980). He, too, sees racism as that which structures our relationships to the means of production in capitalism – or, as he famously phrased it, "[race] is thus, also, the modality in which class is 'lived', the medium through which class relations are experienced" (341). But unlike Robinson, Hall rejects the idea that race has "a single, unitary, transhistorical character," instead emphasising the need to analyse "historically-specific racisms" (308; 336). In speaking of racism in the past impacting the present, one runs the risk of *naturalising* and universalising racism, of portraying it as part of all human behaviour. In speaking of racism as haunting the present, one instead risks *supernaturalising* it, turning it into a force or phenomenon that manifests despite our best efforts to keep it at bay. Hall's characterisation of racial capitalism, I think, is an important corrective to both, in that it brings racism down to earth – it is figured not as a phantom, but as an adaptive system – presenting it as possible to challenge and change.

Poets, Critics and Other Mediums: Literature Review

As mentioned previously, the poets whose work I focus on in this study are Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jackie Kay, Maud Sulter and Jay Bernard. It was through finding Johnson's debut poetry collection *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) in the British Library that the idea behind this study germinated, which, taken together with the fact that Johnson is one of Britain's most famous performers and poets, made it and him crucial to include. *Voices of the Living and the Dead* is a powerful, intermedial lyrical play that establishes a poetic and political rapport

between the dead and the living, uniting them in revolutionary action against a society that buries them both.

Not much criticism has been produced about Johnson's debut. This may be because its central piece is regarded as unrepresentative of Johnson's *oeuvre*, being an allegorical play written in Standard English. One exception is Bartosz Wójcik's "Africanism in Linton Kwesi Johnson's Early Poetry" (2010), which centres on a mostly descriptive reading of the play in relation to Afrocentric political and artistic discourses, highlighting its blood-and-fire imagery. However, nothing is said about the way in which the text portrays the relationship between the living and the dead, and the wider implications of that depiction. Jordan Musser's absorbing "The Avant-Garde is in the Audience: On the Popular Avant-Gardism of Linton Kwesi Johnson's Dub Poetry" (2019) mentions the "dual temporality" of *Voices* and sees its intermediality as drawing on a broader tradition of Afro-diasporic experimentation (464). Moreover, Musser's article offers a way into Johnson via C.L.R. James; just as the latter rejected the idea of a vanguard party, Musser argues, Johnson's avant-gardism is in and of the audience. *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, then, is understood as part of that practice.

Musser touches on the "Fanonist undertones of *Voices*" and its implications for Johnson's cultural politics in one sentence (486). Apart from Musser, however, almost all mentions of Fanon in relation to Johnson have to do with Fanon's analysis of violence in the colonies. In his comprehensive book on Johnson, *Dread, Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution* (2018), David Austin, for example, reads Johnson through Fanon's description of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), pointing out its influence on Johnson. So does Robert J. Stewart in "Poetry Down a Reggae Wire" (1993) and Graham MacPhee in a chapter of his book *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (2011). In my reading, I aim to show that Fanon's perspective on the relationship between the colonised artist and his community is a fruitful line of inquiry into Johnson and his poetry.

It should be noted that criticism on Johnson tends to prioritise his work from the late '70s and '80s, often emphasising its occasional

nature. [5] But as with hauntology, it would be remiss not to consider Johnson's future-oriented politics, and how they are expressed in his literary form. "Rethinking Utopianism in Caribbean Diasporic Narratives" by Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra goes some way to remedying that, but focuses entirely on a brief, descriptive reading of "Di Anfinish Revalueshan." There are, I submit, a variety of radical futures contained in Johnson's pasts, and they suffuse his works.

Overall, it would not be an exaggeration to state that most criticism on Johnson foregrounds his politics in relation to his poetics, often centring his linguistic and formal strategies as modes of anti-or-postcolonial resistance.[6] One example is Kim Evelyn's "Resistance and the Dub Griot: Four Linton Kwesi Johnson Poems, Policing, and Social Unrest" (2020), which characterises Johnson as a griot, agitating against (and documenting the facts of) police brutality in his community. In the chapter on Johnson in his book *The Poetics and Politics of Diaspora: Transatlantic Musings* (2015), Jerome C. Branch also casts Johnson as a documentarian, focusing on Johnson writing on police violence on the one hand, and reggae on the other.

Resistance is also the main thrust of Dilek Sarikaya's "The Construction of Afro-Caribbean Cultural Identity in the Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson" (2011). In Sarikaya's fairly straightforward reading of Johnson's works, the primary purpose of his poetry is speaking to and constructing a black radical community, while also formulating a diasporic Afro-Caribbean identity. Louisa Olufsen Layne offers a materialist approach in "Sound Systems and Other Systems: The Policing of Urban Aesthetic Spaces in the Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson" (2018),

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[5] A notable exception is Robert McGill's "Goon poets of the black Atlantic: Linton Kwesi Johnson's imagined canon" (2003), which argues that "If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet," from 1991, establishes an unstable canon that allows Johnson himself to evade and question categorisation. Similarly, Henghameh Saroukhani's "Penguinizing dub: Paratextual frames for transnational protest in Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*" (2015) explores how the most apparent symbol of Johnson's canonisation, the Penguin Modern Classics collection *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* (2002), reframes and recontextualises Johnson's poetry in ways that provide stimulating and productive transatlantic interchanges.

[6] Perhaps tellingly, Shalini Puri in "Beyond Resistance: Notes Toward a New Caribbean Cultural Studies" (2003) warns that an emphasis on resistance in the field of Caribbean cultural studies creates a critical "monotony" (33). While I must concede that I, too, write about aesthetic forms of resistance, my aim is to examine subtler, textual hauntings as part of a broader ethical and political project. I believe that it is possible to discuss Johnson's politics *and* his role as an innovator of literary form, without flattening the various tones, voices and modulations of which he is capable.

which examines the way in which black art becomes politicised and confrontational through hostile interventions enabled by urban planning. Similarly, Ashley Dawson provides a fascinating look at Johnson's dialogic relationship with carnival's oppositional forces in "Behind the Mask: Carnival Politics and British Identity in Linton Kwesi Johnson's Dub Poetry" (2007).

Since the mid-seventies, Johnson has performed his poems with musical accompaniment, as well as publishing them as written texts. From what I have read, no one has looked at the interplay of absence and presence activated by the transposition of the spoken word to the page, and the way in which that gesture calls back to "the activity of adding and/or removing sounds" characteristic of dub (Morris 1).[7]

Kay, who is a widely known, broadly read and influential black British poet, was appointed Scotland's Makar between 2016 and 2021 ("Story of the Makar"). Her lyrical play *The Lamplighter* (2008), written on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade, speaks directly to the hauntological concerns I have raised in this introduction: past exploitation (in this case, of enslaved African women) shaping the present and the future, envisaged through spatiotemporal and formal destabilisation.

Readings of Kay's work also tend to be political, stressing questions of identity and hybridity, particularly in relation to adoption, Scottishness, blackness, and queerness.[8] Because this study pursues

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[7] Manuela Coppola's "Spelling out Resistance: Dub Poetry and Typographic Resistance" and Liam Connell and Victoria Sheppard's comparative reading "Race, Nation, Class and Language Use in Tom Leonard's *Intimate Voices* and Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*" (2011) consider Johnson's spoken and written voices as politically inflected and deployed. Coppola points to the way in which Johnson's spelling varies not just from Standard English, but also between poems, to propose that his literary tactic evades colonial standardisation and homogenisation. Connell and Sheppard offer close readings of some Johnson's most famous poems to, first, demonstrate Johnson's use of a range of voices; second, that Johnson depicts race as cut through by class, and vice versa.

[8] Some readings that have been particularly illuminating to this study are Anna McFarlane's "The Poetry of Civic Nationalism: Jackie Kay's 'Bronze Head From Ife'" (2017), which, through a careful close reading of Kay's poem, argues that it demonstrates a new assertiveness about her Scottish and Nigerian ancestry; Jane Gray's "The Woman with the Ibo Nose and the Scottish Tongue: Expressions of Belonging and Return in Jackie Kay's Writing" (2010) navigates Kay's portrayals of multiple nationalities and identities; and Katharine Cockin's "Rethinking Transracial Adoption: Reading Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*" (2003) examines Kay's fictive selves in her groundbreaking debut poetry collection *The Adoption Papers*, noting the book's ambivalent, often contradictory depiction of its subject (1991).

the covert and overt apparitions in *The Lamplighter*, situating it in its black Atlantic context, "Re-charting the Black Atlantic: Jackie Kay's Cartographies of the Self" (2015), by Carla Rodríguez González, and Samantha Pinto's "The world and the 'jar': Jackie Kay and the feminist futures of the black diaspora" (2010) have been especially relevant. González relates Kay's national and local concerns, as represented in her work, to a black Atlantic, internationalist context, while Pinto, too, centres Kay's feminist internationalism. Interestingly, Pinto submits that Kay's formulation of diaspora imagines itself and the world as existing beyond historical and national time – something that I aim to prove is also true for *The Lamplighter* and its spectral timelines (2008).

Fiction as truth, and as intervention into idealised pasts, recurs as a point of analysis in relation to *The Lamplighter*. Gioia Angeletti's "'The Plantation Owner is Never Wearing a Kilt': Historical Memory and True Tales in Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*" (2013) is one such text, reflecting on Kay's verse play as a corrective retelling of the history of slavery in Scotland, a way to refocus one's gaze on the present through the past. "Creative Challenges to Captivity: Slave Authorship in Black British Neo-Slave Narratives" (2017) by Elisabeth Bekers and "Twenty-First-Century Retreats from Realism: Genre Crossings Between Poetry and Drama in *born bad*, *The Lamplighter*, and *Is God Is*" (2025), also by Elisabeth Bekers, with co-authors Janine Hauthal and Jade Thomas, hone in on form. The former reads the collective voice with which the women in the play speak as, partially, a way to incorporate readers/listeners into the story(telling); the latter both reads and listens to the play, stressing its generic hybridity. Petra Tournay-Theodotou also explores Kay's literary form, but through trauma theory, in "'Love Letter to My Ancestors:" Representing Traumatic Memory in Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*" (2014). Generally, critical attention is paid to the past and the present, and circularity is often associated with traumatic repetition and regained wholeness; my intention is to demonstrate that the play's circularity indicates futurity through repetition and variation, and that brokenness (fragmented speech, shattered lives) is what enables the spectre's return.

Sulter's perspective chimes with, and complements, Kay's; her debut poetry collection, *As a Blackwoman: Poems 1982-1985* (1985), is preoccupied with the conditions for black women in a society that

once enslaved and colonised them, and which now seeks to suppress and phantomise them. Although known primarily as a visual artist, Sulter has, in fact, written several books of poetry; alongside *As a Blackwoman*, I also include *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree* (1989) to discuss her rendition of a spectral and messianic Africa, an imagined past that (like the spectre) disrupts normative chronology. In the spirit of a more spectral logic, I have placed the chapter on Sulter after the chapter on Kay, despite Sulter's books being published in the 1980s.

Although Sulter is rarely considered principally for her poetry, analyses of her art are not unhelpful when attempting to approach her as a poet. On the contrary, Deborah Cherry uses hauntology as an entry point to Sulter's installation *Syrcas* in "The Ghost Begins By Coming Back: Revenants and Returns in Maud Sulter's Photomontages" (2015). As I intend to demonstrate, however, Sulter's literary hauntological strategies differ radically from her visual ones. Nisha Ramayya's engaging "Curve Warp Corpse: D.S. Marriott, E.A. Markham, John La Rose, Maud Sulter, and Bhanu Kapil" (2019), which dedicates some time to Sulter's circular temporalities, and her construction of new realities and selves, has been helpful in exploring those strategies.

Similarly, Susannah Thompson's "'I Name Myself Zami': Maud Sulter's Queer Form" (2024) and Churnjeet Mahn's "The Uses of Queer Scottish Form" (2024) perspectives on Sulter's self-fashioning and distinctively political aesthetic offer insights about Sulter as a poet. Thompson orients Sulter and her writing within the black feminist Atlantic, noting the queer communities she creates through relation, coded language, and mythologised pasts; Mahn compares Kay and Sulter, as contemporaries active in black feminist circles, and reflects on "queer form" as necessarily composite and diverse.[9]

Finally, I have chosen to write about Jay Bernard's pamphlet *The Red and Yellow Nothing* (2016) in chapter two and their poetry collection *Surge* (2019) in chapter six. Bernard is the youngest poet in this study, and *Surge* the most recently published work. While the pamphlet is slim, it is dense and allusive, and forms the basis of my inquiry into a spectral poetics of relation. *Surge* is concerned with how poetry can trouble the past, specifically in relation to accounts found in

[9] It should also be noted that, in chapter five, I consider Sulter's constructed Africa, arguing that it is incorrect to, as Jim Mabon does in "Europe's African Heritage in the Creative Work of Maud Sulter" (1998), take Sulter's depiction of an unproblematic African past at face value.

archives, while exploring the connection between the devastating New Cross fire in 1981, which killed fourteen young black people and children, and the Grenfell tower fire in 2017.

Naturally, then, criticism on Bernard tends to gravitate towards the archive. In "Jay Bernard's *Surge*: Archival Interventions in Black British Poetry" (2019), Sarah Lawson Welsh offers a partially hauntological reading of *Surge* – ultimately, however, I disagree with Welsh's understanding of hauntology as a disappearance (and spectral persistence) of the future or futures. For me, it is important to distinguish *hauntology* – as an ethical imperative, an opening up of the future – from *haunting*.[10] In "'For here, we have not an enduring city, but we are looking for the city to come': Dysgraphia of disaster and wayward Black futures in Jay Bernard's *Surge* (2019)" (2022) Cathie Kanagavalli Lakshmi Jayakumar-Hazra also describes mourning in *Surge* as "another time that can be narrated and remembered for what it was, or might have been" (10), but I want to insist on that narration being part of what *will be*.

In Juha Virtanen's "'love : necessity : anti-fa': Hostile Environments and Necropolitics in Nat Raha's *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and Jay Bernard's *Surge*" (2023), the necropolitical consequences of Britain's increasingly harsh anti-immigrant turn since the 2010s are read alongside *Surge*, parsing its radical, elegiac mode. Neo-elegy is also the perspective applied by Lourdes López-Ropero in "Two London fires and a critique of grievability: Mournful protest, the Black elegy, and Jay Bernard's *Surge* (2019)" (2024).[11] As of now, I have found no academic work on Bernard's pamphlet *The Red and Yellow Nothing* (2016), except a fleeting mention in Kate Houlden's "Redefining the Boundaries: Black and Asian Queer Desires" in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (2020). The final chapter on Bernard brings us back to the beginning – to chapter two – in a way

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[10] The same reading of hauntology – lost futures in the present – can be found in Dominic Davies' "The City of the Missing: Poetic Responses to the Grenfell Fire" (2023). I discuss that perspective further in chapter one, which contains an overview of hauntology in and about Britain.

[11] Tara Briusselaers' "Breaking the Mould: Multimodality in Jay Bernard's *Surge* and Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*" (2024) is a comparative reading that centres Bernard's inclusion of materials from the archive – photographs and pamphlets – to argue that the images "[highlight] that these are not isolated tragedies," but symptoms of systematic neglect (85).

that arguably resonates with the non-linear, non-synchronous nature of the spectral temporalities and narratives examined in these texts.

Repetition and Last Time: Beginning at the End

Earlier, I proposed that following the ghost involves letting oneself be led – possibly, perhaps hopefully, astray. But the spectre is an unexpected and unpredictable visitor; its appearances are not necessarily restorative or benign. In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, America has seen a resurgence in far-right and fascist actors, including in the government; Black Lives Matter Plaza, a sizeable mural installed in Washington DC in 2020, has been removed after direct pressure from the same president who designated anti-fascists as domestic terrorists (Segraves; Sardarizadeh and Devlin). In Europe, neo-fascist groups and parties are being invited into coalition governments, and antagonism towards migrants and immigration is becoming increasingly mainstream (Adler). The current global order is haunted by nightmarish apparitions, on the one hand, and the limitless work of justice and mourning, on the other. The spectre carries a promise and, for the sake of generations past and future, that promise must be kept alive.

In the first chapter, I introduce hauntology through Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, paying particular attention to its ethical and future-oriented aspects. I then engage with critical theorist Mark Fisher's interpretation of hauntology, arguing that, in a broader British context, that interpretation has served as the foundation of new engagements with the theory, resulting in a form of hauntology that centres the past. Consequently, the ethical aspect of hauntology has been lost, and the construction of a loose hauntological canon has excluded writers with alternative perspectives on British pasts and futures. The chapter then argues that recentring the messianic allows black British writers to be read in conversation with hauntology: they, too, revisit the past to invoke a future that must (but cannot) come, in community with the living and the dead. Gilroy's *black Atlantic* serves as a framework for understanding the spatiotemporal and spectral disturbances experienced and communicated by members of the black diaspora, before

the chapter concludes with a discussion of Christina Sharpe's concept of *the wake* and her emphasis on caring for the dead.

Chapter two, "A Spectral Poetics of Relation: Reading Poetry Through Hauntology," juxtaposes Glissant's *poetics of relation* with hauntology to produce a method for reading poetry that stays open to spectrality and the messianic promise: a spectral poetics of relation. Through concepts such as *relation*, *errantry* and *opacity*, I apply that method of reading to Jay Bernard's 2016 pamphlet *The Red and Yellow Nothing*, considering its portrayal of identity itself as a fundamentally textual haunting.

The third chapter, "Linton Kwesi Johnson's Living and Dead Voices," analyses Johnson's view of the Jamaican past as inescapably present, before relating his observation, and the role it plays in his politics, to the artist's duty in the colonial situation as outlined by Frantz Fanon. This is followed by a close (spectral and relational) reading of the first and primary text in Johnson's debut poetry collection, the lyrical play *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, focusing particularly on the interplay between the living and their deceased comrades. Finally, I consider the oral and the written aspects of Johnson's work through the poet and theorist Fred Moten, reading the absent presences enacted on stage versus page.

"'Wanted, dead or alive': Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*," the fourth chapter of this study, centres Kay's lyrical play *The Lamplighter* and its enmeshed, hauntological temporalities, examining repetition and return in the text. Spectral asymmetry, and the spectre's ability to see without being seen, is then considered in the context of the relative visibility of enslaved black women; one function of that asymmetry, I submit, is to encourage action in the living. Finally, I contend that using call-and-response as a structuring principle embraces the crowd as the basis of resilience and resistance.

In chapter five, "'To document the future': Maud Sulter's Future Pasts," the issue of visibility recurs through Sulter's confrontational, oppositional response to black women's suppression in society. I propose that her poetry creates a way for black women to *access* spectrality and justice in the Derridean sense: as a work of generations, stretching backwards and forwards in time. Her explicit style is an effect of attempting to describe the black woman in a language designed to silence

her, while her vision of Africa is an imagined past that can conjure diasporic, ungraspable dreams of radically new futures.

In the final chapter, "'What remains': Jay Bernard and the Poetry of the Sepulchre," I approach the use of the archive in Bernard's poetry collection *Surge* through Achille Mbembe's "The Power of the Archive and its Limits" (2002), proposing that poetry is used to liberate the agency of the dead as gathered in (and stilled by) the archive. Here, poetry is not imagined as resurrection, but as *insurrection* against the repressive forces of state power as expressed through cultures of remembering and forgetting.

To borrow from Derrida, the ghost does not "give time, not that one" (*Specters* xix). It enters by exiting and leads by following. Introducing the spectre, as I have tried to do here, is to admit that it was already present, waiting for acknowledgment. To it, one might say, as Johnson does: "welcome nocturnal friend/ I name you beacon of hope" (*Selected Poems* 61).

1. Ghost Ships Against the Current

> And this being-with spectres would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.
> – Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1994)

> [...] Warm up
> them planes, boys, we are returning a cargo called
> Windrush generation.
> – Roger Robinson, *A Portable Paradise* (2019)

Ghosts are disruptive presences: the troubled dead returning to unsettle settled narratives, orthodoxies and ideologies. A text that seeks to engage the ghost without diminishing its impact, then, must allow for its disturbances, and any attendant failures. In the context of ghost stories, however, failure – of rituals, processes of containment, banishments and exorcisms – is a central and structuring principle of the narrative. When a séance is conducted, the medium recounts the rules only so that we may know precisely when, how and by whom they will be broken. We are made to anticipate the candle being snuffed out, a fearful cry at the moment of incantation, a hand letting go – and watch with a thrill of horror as a connection is established and the dead slip in through the cracks. It is through failure that the ghost is empowered to pursue its own form of contact, and it is unrestrained, volatile, and always other.

With failure in mind, then, this study is conducted in the spirit of the séance: as an opening up of a communicative space or circle between myself and the reader, through which an unknown third may unexpectedly enter. This opening chapter conceptualises the theoretical basis of the study, proceeds to discuss hauntology, spectral temporalities, and a radical, expanding, and undeconstructible justice. It then examines hauntology as interpreted by, and then reinterpreted through, cultural theorist Mark Fisher, arguing that, as operationalised by a number of British writers and theorists, the term has become limited in its transnational and transtemporal scope; in short, theorists rarely ask themselves what haunts "Britishness" in so-called British

hauntology. Through sociologist and cultural theorist Paul Gilroy's conception of the *black Atlantic*, this chapter then goes on to consider the spectral character of the black diaspora in Britain, having been constituted through temporal and geographic displacement and proximity to (different forms of) death. The ensuing analysis touches on, but is not limited to, Paul Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic, Christina Sharpe's *wake*, and, crucially, the figure or image of the ship.

"Re-enter the Ghost": The Spirits of Hauntology

In their comprehensive overview of academic writing with and through the spectre, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Critical Theory* (2013), María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pereen identify "the spectral turn" of the 1990s with Jacques Derrida's publication of *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* in 1993. First published in English in 1994, *Specters of Marx* was originally a series of lectures given at a conference at the University of California, Riverside, in 1993, called "Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective" (*Specters* x). Written after the fall of the Soviet Union, *Specters of Marx* is a complex, multivalent attempt at reckoning not with the end of communism, but its restless afterlives. Derrida opposes "the dominant discourse," one that "diagnoses [...] not only the end of societies constructed on the Marxist model but the end of the whole Marxist tradition, even of the reference to the works of Marx, not to say the end of history, period" (69). In response, Derrida insists on the persistence of Marx's spirit(s) in the world, its centrality to future political projects, and its presence in the work of deconstruction. It is in this politically charged context that hauntology makes its appearance, responding to the disintegration of a particular world order and repudiating the emergent one.

Hauntology is a pun that poses a ghastly challenge to ontology. What we know to *be here* is always already haunted by what *is not here*, every presence made possible through an absence. "If [the] sense of tangible certainty and solidity corresponds to ontology, then, as something on which conceptuality can build [...] how to describe what literally undermines it and shakes our belief?" Fredric Jameson asks in his

response to *Specters of Marx*. "Derrida's mocking answer—hauntology—is a ghostly echo if there ever was one, and serves to underscore the very uncertainties of the spectral itself" (38). But Derrida's absence is still present – it haunts – and what we see, hear or feel is in turn marked by the invisible, the inaudible, and the intangible: "The specter, as the name indicates, is the *frequency* of a certain visibility" (*Specters* 125). Derrida's spectre, as envisioned in hauntology, renders all our certainties, whether ideological, material or metaphysical, open to some ghost.

Attendant to the spectre's invisible visibility, its simultaneous absence and presence, is that it can never fully manifest without being undone as a spectre. Moreover, and because all presence is possible only through absence, the spectre being made present merely suppresses someone or something else. The point of hauntology, then, can never be exorcism, during which the spectral presence is known, neutralised and ejected; instead, it must involve listening to a particular speaking silence, observing that invisible visibility. I point this out to indicate what will be a central concern of this study: hauntology as an ethical commitment to that which is not (yet, or quite), without forcing it into being.

If the spectre's simultaneous presence and (or through) absence disturbs ontology, it has a similarly troubled, troubling relationship to time. "[H]aunting is historical, to be sure," Derrida admits, "but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar" (*Specters* 3). Although tied to a past event – a person or perspective, a political tendency or social struggle – its story is inevitably that of something coming back or being about to come back. When the protagonist of a ghost story enters a derelict house, the tension is derived not from the fact that someone once lived and died there, but from the anticipation of their return. "The revenant is going to come," Derrida reminds us (2). Thought of as such, the spectre is a piece of the past that hails from the future. Put differently, the spectre calls attention both to the constructed nature of linear time, and the ways in which non-linearity opens up new forms of engagement with and interventions from the past, the present and the future.

The literary ghost that forms the foundation of Derrida's analysis is one whose appearance, famously, is a symptom of the times being

awry: Hamlet's murdered father. His return to the ramparts of Elsinore causes the unhappy son to exclaim: "The time is out of joint/ O cursed spite/ that ever I was born to set it right!" But what happens if time is (impossibly) set right? Something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark, something beyond the murder of the King, and this rottenness manifests itself partly through time's disjointedness. What must be done, then, is to understand that temporal disjunction as inherently revelatory. As Katy Shaw writes in *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (2018): "The experience of being haunted is one of noticing absences in the present, recognizing fissures, gaps and points of crossover" (2).

Through noticing and recognising, rather than mending and exorcising, we accept a loss of control over what is commonly viewed as dead matter and disappeared connections. More than that, we accept that we can be observed, even reached, through these fissures and gaps, setting the conditions for an ongoing and dynamic relationship to the spectre-as-other: "[I]s not this disjuncture, this dis-adjustment of the 'it's going badly' necessary for the good, or at least the just, to be announced? Is not disjuncture the very possibility of the other?" (*Specters* 26). Perhaps the possibility of the other is what one senses when the circle breaks apart, the candle is snuffed out, and a window suddenly creaks open, letting in an unexpected, black wind.

That is not to say, of course, that no action is to be taken in regard to the spectre's demands – quite the contrary, in fact. "*Hamlet* [...] did not merely tell about some grisly hold of the past on the present [...], but rather showed the apparition of the past in the act of provoking future action and calling for retribution by the living," Jameson contends (39). But restitution – the truth exposed, Claudius murdered – is available within the law, or the time and place within which law is constructed. What is asked of us in relation to the spectre is more than restitution; it is justice both as expectation *and* ongoing, developing praxis. In the Derridean sense, justice is and must necessarily be beyond the law, beyond calculation, distribution, and revenge; beyond the present moment, it is "the place for justice" and the basis of one's relation to the other (*Specters* 26). Like the spectre, this sense of justice advances simultaneously from the past and the future: "[Can] one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of

vengeance?" (25). That yearning for justice, in fact, fundamentally structures our relationship to the future. Our longing for what will come, what promises to come, but can never arrive – because it would then cease to be a promise – is referred to by Derrida as "the messianic: the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of *the arrivant as justice*" (35).

In *Specters of Marx*, the messianic is considered in relation to the indelible mark Marx left on the world – the promise of emancipation. It is not, Derrida insists, in a response to Fredric Jameson, utopianism: "[Messianicity] refers, in every here-now, to the coming of an eminently real, concrete event, that is, to the most irreducibly heterogenous otherness. Nothing is more 'realistic' or 'immediate' than this messianic apprehension" ("Marx & Sons" 248). If utopianism is the no-place, the perfect world, the messianic is defined by waiting, hope, and suspense – not fulfilment. Utopia, as the sociologist Avery Gordon indicates, "presumes the presence of a perfect world, a world in which there is no otherness because no difference in Derrida's sense" ("Haunting and Futurity" 6). A world, that is, without spectres.

At the heart of *Specters of Marx* is the proposition that a continuous confrontation with the spectre's otherness, the weight of its gaze, its distortions of time and space, is an ethical commitment one must have towards the immaterial, the long-ago, the not-yet. It is worth quoting Derrida at length, here, for the force and weight of his argument:

> If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts [...] it is in the name of justice [...] no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born... No justice... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. (xviii)

Hauntology's critique of ontology, then, extends into the political realm, establishing an ethical imperative that connects the present – and those who inhabit it – with the dead and the not-yet-born, charging

us with "[living] *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts" (*Specters* xviii). Being "in the company, or the companionship" with ghosts is to take seriously the agency and alterity of those who are not "presently living," and to respond to them.

Writing about ghosts, in this sense, does not necessarily involve the supernatural – no séances, no exorcisms, no flickering candlelight. After all, and despite its ability to strike fear into the hearts of liberal economists, the spectre of communism is no occult force. But if I am getting ready to linger at length with ghosts, it is to read texts in which victims of "nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist [...] exterminations" appear as dead-and-alive, silent-and-speaking witnesses, workers, revolutionaries, documentarians, and dreamers. To be clear, my purpose is not to present these poems as perfectly expressing Derridean hauntology; in almost all of the works studied, the ghosts reveal themselves, are sometimes made flesh, and are often in collusion with their living companions on the basis of shared histories, experiences, and material interests. But by placing these poets in the upkeep, the conversation, the company of hauntology, I want to demonstrate the extent to which their understanding of spectrality as a structure of thought also aligns it with the future – an impossible, unknowable, and other future, which the spectre at times permits us to intuit.

On a different but related note, I also find it important to stay with this brief, brutal and expansive list of victims who, in *Specters of Marx*, remain unspeaking and largely undefined. Derrida raises the stakes, stressing the absolute necessity to take some action in response to the exterminations instantiated by the mechanisms and institutions of the new (old) world order, but lowers them when he begins to turn theory into praxis. The social problems he identifies – ranging from homelessness (or an artificially imposed housing shortage), to the military-industrial complex, to the unequal application of international law – are to be addressed through a vaguely defined "New International" (105). Its purpose is to fold the economic and social fields into international law, offering a critique influenced by Marxism, but one that requires little political homogeneity: "without coordination, without party, without country, without national community, without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class" (107). In her response to *Specters of Marx*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks, I think

rightly, "How […] is the New International so new? Perhaps it is, to the European left liberal; but why should the South feel any degree of confidence in the project?" (69) International law, she points out, is already intervening in the social and economic field – on behalf of international capital. What, then, can the New International offer the Global South?

This is where it becomes particularly unfortunate that Derrida dismisses "*de facto* 'Marxism' or 'communism,'" including "the Soviet Union, the International of Communist Parties, and everything that resulted from them" (15) – because it precludes any intellectual engagement with the many attempts at implementing Marxism, very often in the Global South, where, as Spivak points out, "the specter of Marxism has been at work, molelike" (322).[12] While this is a literary study, and not a work of political theory, it is one that takes seriously the political and politicised aesthetic discourses that have emerged from liberatory social movements, many of them influenced by the spirits of Marxism developed in once colonised (now post-or-neocolonial) contexts.

As I have outlined it, hauntology reveals ontology as porous, permeable, and haunted; it does so, primarily, in the service of justice, and in the (or a) spirit of Marx. But if this is the case, how is it that Merlin Coverley, author of *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past* (2020), summarises the concept as "a shorthand for the ways in which the past returns to haunt the present" (7)? Why does Adam Scovell, in his book *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Strange* (2017), consider hauntology related to folk horror, psychogeography, and nature writing, remarking that hauntology is "commonly used to account for our own cultural, and sometimes moral, relationships with British artefacts from the 1970s" (122)? It appears as though hauntology itself is beset by some spirit – the spirits of alternative hauntologies.

The Ethics and Aesthetics of British Hauntology

In Britain, hauntology's popularity as a critical framework for understanding the culture of contemporary capitalist modernity grew in the early 2000s, becoming, as Shaw indicates, "part of the zeitgeist of

[12] I will be returning to Spivak's text – aptly titled "Ghostwriting" (1995) – in chapter five.

academic and popular criticism in England" and a "lens through which to read a twenty-first century English culture seemingly more concerned with co-opting the past than embracing the future" (2). That popularity was largely due to the work of Mark Fisher, whose redeployment of hauntology in the area cultural criticism is frequently cited alongside (and sometimes instead of) Derrida. For Coverley, for instance, while Derrida may be the "father" of hauntology, Fisher "has become its patron-saint and elucidator in chief" (259). Perhaps best known for the perceptive and influential *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), one of Fisher's primary concerns was the way in which the revolutionary imagination became circumscribed by the pervasive, insidious and omnipresent effects of late capitalism. Alongside Fredric Jameson, Fisher made the argument that it has indeed become easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism, and he reflected on the cultural objects and moments that shaped, commented on, or subverted that idea.

Together with music critic Simon Reynolds, Fisher began using the term hauntology in 2005 to "describe a loose network of mostly UK artists," whose distinctive aesthetic appeared to respond to a specific political moment: the seeming triumph of neoliberalism and the concomitant, but gradual, erosion of the future (Reynolds 328). In *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014), Fisher argues that the loss of the future creates a culture that is simultaneously stagnant and frenzied, obsessively retrospective because "not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible" (*Ghosts* 21). On the other hand, some artists developed what Fisher calls a hauntological sensibility, audible in their use of anachronistic static and crackle, and samples of old films and radio plays; theirs is a notably politicised form of melancholia, foregrounding not just the loss of a particular technology, but the world in which that technology operated – a world in which the future was possible. By "refusing to give up the ghost," by refusing to declare the past dead, they simultaneously refuse to give up on the future(s) the ghost manifests (*Ghosts* 21- 22).

As I have suggested, Fisher's hauntology diverges somewhat from Derrida's, and not only because it is put to another use. The nature of that divergence becomes clearer when comparing the way in which the two characterise mourning and melancholia via the psychoanalytic model. For Sigmund Freud, mourning is a process through which the

loss of the "loved object" leads to a gradual withdrawal of all libido from that object; melancholia, on the other hand, occurs when that withdrawal is interrupted and redirected (Freud 245; 249). With Freud as his point of departure, Fisher concludes that "[h]aunting, then, can be construed as failed mourning. It is about refusing to give up the ghost or [...] the refusal of the ghost to give up on us" (*Ghosts* 22). At the risk of seeming overly pedantic, I believe that two conceptions of mourning are in circulation in Fisher's text – Freud's and Derrida's – and that this has deeper implications for his argument moving forward. After all, the spectre poses a profound challenge to the psychoanalytic model. How does one mourn successfully in light of "the spectral, of life-death beyond the opposition between life and death" (*Specters* 67)?

Derrida responds to that question by conceiving of a "mourning in fact and by right interminable, without possible normality, without reliable limit, in its reality or in its concept, between introjection and incorporation" (121). In "Fors," an introductory essay to psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word; A Cryptonomy* (1986), originally published in 1976, Derrida questions the authors' strict separation of introjection and incorporation as ways of differentiating "so-called normal mourning" from its pathological counterpart (xvii).[13] While the former is described by the authors as an expansive process that assimilates the dead other into the self, the latter simply preserves that dead other as separate, "[pretending] to keep the dead alive, intact, safe (save) inside me, but it is only in order to refuse [...] to love the dead as a living part of me" ("Fors" xvi-xvii). Derrida complicates the distinction between the two psychic states by emphasising the agency and otherness of the dead: "The question could of course be raised as to whether or not 'normal' mourning preserves the object as other (a living person dead) inside me" (xxxviii). Derrida posits that, in both introjection and incorporation "[everything] is organized in order that [the dead] *remain* a missing person in both cases, having vanished, as *other*, from the operation, whether it be mourning or melancholy" (xxxviii).[14]

[13] Colin Davies refers to Abraham and Torok as a "less acknowledged [...] source of hauntology," as their work also concerns phantoms – though their ghosts work to suppress and hide traumatic secrets from the living (374).
[14] Several of Derrida's texts on and in mourning have been collected in *The Work of Mourning* (2003), translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas.

Derrida's approach to mourning, proposes rhetorician Michelle Ballif, "takes issue with the notion that keeping the dead other alive is fundamentally a pathological move," as in Freud's description of the melancholic, because "[one] is always already [...] mourning the loss of the other," even in life (Ballif 459). Death itself is spectral, an absent presence that renders mourning constitutive of the (relation to the) self and other. Derrida's model of mourning, then, acknowledges that "the dead other sets up the conditions for the impossibility of mourning [...] because [...] the dead other is always already with/in the self" (Ballif 462). Derridean haunting is not *failed* mourning, except insofar as all mourning is failed; nor is it oriented towards the past, as one's relationship with the dead continues.

It is no surprise, then, that Derrida takes such issue with Antonio Negri's characterisation of *Specters of Marx*: "[Negri] believes that he can make out a movement of 'nostalgia', of 'melancholy', a 'work of mourning', in what I am doing [...] deconstruction [...] is anything but a negative movement of nostalgia and melancholy" ("Marx & Sons" 259). Similarly, in a 1983 interview, he comments, "I rarely speak of loss, just as I rarely speak of lack, because these are words that belong to the code of negativity [...] I believe desire is affirmation, and consequently that mourning itself is affirmation as well" (*Points* 143). Derridean mourning is affirmative, because it belongs to the register of desire; Fisher, however, proceeds from failed mourning to what he terms *hauntological melancholia* (*Ghosts* 23).

Fisher's hauntological melancholia is defiant, not defeatist. As such, Fisher argues, it must be understood as distinct from the philosopher Wendy Brown's nostalgic, apathetic, and apolitical *left melancholy*, as described in *Politics Out of History* (2001):

> Left melancholy, in short, is [Walter] Benjamin's name for a mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to feelings, analyses, or relations that have become fetishized and frozen in the heart of the critic [...] this condition presumably issues from some unaccountable loss, some unavowably crushed ideal – an ideal that lives in empty time rather than the time of the Now precisely to the extent that it is imagined to have been killed by time, that it is lost in time, that it is unrecoverable. (Brown 170)

According to Fisher, hauntological melancholia "[refuses] to yield," where the left melancholic instead remains passively attached to their

failure (*Ghosts* 24). Fisher also differentiates hauntological melancholia from Paul Gilroy's *postcolonial melancholia*, a refusal to acknowledge the end of empire, and empire's brutal afterlife (Gilroy *Melancholia* 99). Rather, this sense of melancholia arises from the loss of "popular modernism" and, relatedly, the social democratic reforms and institutions of Britain in the '70s. This was a time during which popular culture was accessible to the working-class, albeit one that was also marked by "casual racism, sexism and homophobia" (*Ghosts* 26-27). What is desired is not a return to the past, but a return of the futures promised by that past: "What should haunt us is not the *no longer* of actually existing social democracy, but the *not yet* of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect" (27). Still, introducing melancholia – and, through it, the nostalgic mode – into hauntology is not wholly unproblematic.

First, what happens if the spectre of communism is replaced with the spectre of social democracy, especially when that social democracy partially sustained itself on profits generated through imperialist extraction? Exploitation abroad, of course, was also replicated within the country. When asked by an interviewer about his youth, Linton Kwesi Johnson, who came to Britain in 1963, states, "During the 1960s and 70s for black people, Britain was a very racially hostile place to be living in. Black people were marginalized and treated like third class citizens" (Lowndes). If British hauntology is meant to relate to this historical and cultural moment through melancholia, politicised or otherwise, it is bound to fragment (not always, and not just, but often) along racial lines.[15] Secondly, is there space in hauntological melancholia for "messianicity without messianism" (Derrida "Marx & Sons 250)? If not, what happens to hauntology as an ethical imperative? As is always the case in hauntology, the question of ethics also becomes a matter of time.

Regarding hauntology's spectral temporalities, Fisher identifies two directions: *no longer* and *not yet*. In "What is Hauntology?" (2012) he characterises them:

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[15] Writing about what he and Fisher have dubbed hauntological music, Reynolds admits to wondering if the genre is "a sort of menopause muzak catering to a demographic that's British and mostly male," but makes no mention of internal divisions, such as race, that splinter that demographic, too (343).

> The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a fatal pattern). The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour). (19)

But Derrida's *not yet* is split into two. In Majero Bouman's reading, which I agree with, a distinction must be made between "the foreseeable future (that which can be conjured up from within the structure of the present) and the unknowable future [...] The latter is the ethical stance that haunts and is perceived but cannot be spoken" (265). Without it, there can be "[no] future [...] no justice" ("Marx & Sons" 251). It is positioned, according to Werner Hamacher, as standing in opposition to "the end of all futures, the end of history," because it is "a future which opens other futures" (209). Understood as such, it becomes clear why the messianic is integral to hauntology as a structure of thought – it orients us towards not just the future, but towards all futures, and towards the *revenant* as *arrivant*. Replacing the haunting, unknowable future with ghosts of lost futures is a theoretically significant change that risks overemphasising the past as origin.

Arguably, there is a similar risk in characterising the *no longer* as "the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat'" when, in Derrida's conception, the revenant comes back from the future (*Ghosts* 19; *Specters* 245). What I find more productive, in considering the spectral repetitions with which we are concerned, is Gordon's proposition that "haunting, unlike trauma by contrast, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" ("Haunting and Futurity" 2). Haunting occurs when repression fails; it is the past returning, but with a (demand for) difference.[16]

In the introduction to *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher clarifies that "there are different senses of the word hauntology at play" in the book (28). Indeed, while I have indicated some divergences from Derrida, there are also numerous correspondences. Like Derrida, Fisher takes as his starting point capitalism's conquests in the arena of global politics, arguing that other worlds nevertheless endure in and through our

[16] Gordon acknowledges that her definition of haunting may limit its force and reach; nevertheless, it is one I, too, find useful when navigating the portrayals of the past, the present, and possible (and impossible) futures in the poems studied.

relationship to an insistently *present* past. Traces of lost futures – alternatives to the current crisis – remain, even as they are ignored or distorted, and they are longed for, even expected, and can be redeemed. Fisher's reading of hauntology, then, can be seen in the context of the development of his own critical and political thought; he rejects the repression of the past (and the future) by "disinterring [...] works in which 'time is out of joint' in our current dehistoricized end-of-history moment" ("What is Hauntology" 21).

To some of Fisher's inheritors, however, it is the "[disinterment of] works in which 'time is out of joint'" that constitutes hauntology in its entirety. The result has been the development of a style, form or aesthetics of hauntology that is primarily preoccupied with the "virtual agency of the *no longer*," to borrow a phrase of Fisher's. Moreover, an informal canon of British hauntological texts, films and sounds has taken shape; these tend to have in common the irruption of the past into the present, through more or less metaphorical hauntings, and originate in or refer back to Britain in the 1970s. My contention is that the ongoing detachment of hauntology from the messianic, from the affirmative register, and from the future as radically new and other, also uncouples it from the place and time of justice – and from British artists who explore spectrality from that perspective.

In English writing on spectrality, it is not rare to suggest, as Shaw does in *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature*, that hauntology "is a peculiarly English phenomenon" (2). Coverley, in *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past*, repeats Shaw's statement, remarking that "[t]he subject matter of this book is almost entirely English, for as one critic notes, hauntology is a peculiarly English phenomenon, bound up with the haunting and haunted landscapes of the English countryside and the ambivalent response they continue to evoke" (17). In this account of hauntology, English ghosts – unlike England historically – rarely venture across the border. Arguably, this approach to hauntology and Englishness refers back to Fisher's article "What is Hauntology?" in which he proposes that the Britishness of the works he examines "is no accident – neither is the fact that most [...] of the artists that have been described as hauntological are British" (18). To reiterate, Fisher is making the point that what he refers to as hauntological music originates from the dashed expectations generated by the loss of "a popular culture that could be

challenging and experimental" ("What is Hauntology" 18). However, when contextually "out of joint," the notion that there is something quintessentially British about hauntology itself rapidly unravels.

More troublingly, there is a marked lack of reflection concerning what Britishness or Englishness is, what its historical, ideological and political connotations are, and what effect it has had (and continues to have) on its inheritors. In Jamie Sexton's "Weird Britain in Exile: Ghost Box, Hauntology, and Alternative Heritage" (2012), for example, the problematisation of what constitutes Britishness is limited to a note in which the author states:

> Whilst some related organizations referred to here may be marked as English, I will myself more broadly refer to this movement as British. Even if a sense of Englishness is thought to pervade much of the cultural formation I investigate, there are important non-English aspects which feed into it. Both co-founders of Ghost Box, for example, come from South Wales, as does one of their literary touchstones, Arthur Machen. The Scottish region in which Hardy's *The Wicker Man* was filmed, is also an important reference point for many within this culture. (581-2)

What is "a sense of Englishness" and how and when can it be considered separate from the "non-English" cultures of the British Isles? How and when does the English, the Welsh and the Scottish come together to form a coherent and distinctively British identity? No answers to these or similar questions can be found in Adam Scovell's characterisation of hauntology as "a word denoting relationships in and towards 1970s British culture, especially on film and television," or Diane Rodgers claim that hauntology "is a term that regularly appears alongside folk horror to describe media texts evoking a sense of troubled nostalgic reverberation which, in most cases, stems from 1970s Britain" (Scovell 122; Rodgers 2). The questions these definitions naturally raise are: What is (popularly portrayed as) 1970s British culture? Why is hauntology deployed to this end ("evoking [...] troubled nostalgic reverberation") and which sociopolitical spectres are repressed by the limitations in time and place ("1970s British culture") that have been set? In short, does this understanding of hauntology – which turns inwards, towards British folkloric tradition and the English and British countryside – not evoke that which haunts it, through its surprisingly *visible* invisibility? I am referring to British colonial expansion, which

forcibly folded other landscapes, peoples, languages and cultures into its markets, and which, by the 1970s, had turned the domestic working-class into an ethnically heterogenous population.

Here, it becomes clear that, in transferring hauntology from the realm of political debate to the realm of culture, a particular *aesthetics* of hauntology has been established. In *The Routledge Companion to Folk Horror*, Andy Paciorek's "Nostalgia, Hauntology, and Folk Horror" defines that aesthetic as sonically referencing "1960s/1970s TV's incidental music and library sound effects," while its visual style "has a 1970s-style aesthetic of faded colours" (186). He describes this "pop hauntology" as emerging from "the melancholic memory of growing up in often quite trying but oft fondly remembered days, as well as the additional memories of an anticipated future that never came to pass," while maintaining (but never clearly defining) hauntology's relationship to "new nature writing" and "folk horror" (187).

In the same anthology, Jason D. Brawn, commenting on hauntological soundscapes in folk horror, also lists "library music of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop [...] vintage school textbooks; Penguin paperbacks; uncanny British TV shows," and British horror and science fiction as examples of "the sound and aesthetics of hauntology" (296). Brawn defines hauntology as describing "the return or persistence of elements from the past in the manner of a spectre," adding that Reynolds and Fisher "used this term to define a type of British-based music dominated with a sense of nostalgia for 'lost futures'" (297). The sense of political urgency, present in both Derrida and Fisher, is only present through its absence here.

Interestingly, this understanding of hauntology is prevalent enough to have been satirised. In Alex Niven's *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England* (2019), the author describes sitting down with a friend in front of an eerie BBC series from his childhood, dryly remarking: "A casual observer of our evening and its viewing matter might have judged this to be a hauntological scene pushed well into the realms of stereotype" (55). Noting that the aforementioned series even appeared the same year as *Specters of Marx,* Niven adds: "Whole literary careers have been [...] spun out of such kinky references" (55). Tiring of the show, and shuddering at the idea of being trapped in "a post-theoretical cliché," Niven and his friend settle on a sitcom instead.

Of course, one might wonder why the shift from an ethics to an aesthetics of hauntology is worth calling attention to. Sexton, for example, notes that "the more political dimensions of Derrida's explorations have largely been downplayed" in musical criticism (562), while Coverley argues that the meaning of hauntology has, quite naturally, shifted over time:

> as its carefully policed boundaries are at first threatened and then overrun [...] terms like hauntology [...] come into their own, mutating in new and unexpected ways, broadening their conceptual depth and range of reference, and bringing ideas and figures into conjunction that might have never been brought together. (15)

Coverley also suggests that hauntology has come to resemble the Freudian concept of the uncanny, as it, too, possesses a "malleability that has allowed it to outlive fluctuations in intellectual fashion, a characteristic demonstrated by its appropriation of (or colonisation by) hauntology" (73). But if hauntology (which concerns itself with spectrality in relation to ethics and politics) is conflated with the uncanny (which is psychological), to the extent that the former can overtake the latter, it is a sign that hauntology has lost much of its specificity and therefore its potency. Moreover, an examination of what has become an unofficial literary canon of British hauntology – such as Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, M.R. James and Alan Garner – reveals that the term's mutation has done little to open up hauntology to new and unexpected (re)combinations. These writers of ghost stories and depicters of landscapes haunted by deep time are not "figures [...] that might have never been brought together" under a more generalised banner of spectrality, because spectrality is explicitly what they do.

More pertinent to this study, however, is the way in which this particular spirit of hauntology connotes a certain form or understanding of Britishness, to the exclusion of others.[17] One illustrative example of the way in which a *de facto* hauntological canon has congealed is the list of works that concludes Coverley's book on hauntology: out of the

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[17] Coverley himself only briefly addresses issues of race, and only in relation to the Victorian fear of genetical atavism (the primitive past emerging from within contemporary man). Still, and (it appears) by accident, he nevertheless summons the spectre of race for the reader – "carefully policed boundaries [...] threatened and then overrun" and "([...]colonisation by) hauntology" discursively allude to both immigration and colonialism (15, 73).

forty-one works of film and television listed, twenty-four, more than half, were produced in the 1970s. Only one of the forty-four directors cited, Rachel Jardine, is a woman. No works made by black, Asian and ethnic minority artists are included. In *Listening to Landscape: Hauntology and the Echoes of Albion* (2025), geographer Phil Hubbard raises the potentially exclusionary aspects of hauntology in the contemporary electronic music scene. Having examined the way in which English electronic artists subvert homogenising and reactionary discourses about English rural idyll, Hubbard asks, "[Where] are the non-white performers using hauntological sonics to speak of the production of landscape as reliant on histories of slavery and Empire? [...] Where must we look to find black feminist hauntology?" (215)

While my field of inquiry is literature rather than music, I want to at least attempt to answer those questions. So far, my position has been that the way in which hauntology has developed in Britain has tended to emphasise a (radically) nostalgic or melancholic affect in relation to the recent past, which is said to haunt the present; that recent past does not necessarily evoke the same sentiment in, for example, racial minorities in Britain. Instead, while actively raising that past, the poets in this study also go further – animated by the impossible and inevitable approach of the future.

It is important to note that the messianic almost always surfaces in Fisher's thought when he writes on hauntology in conjunction with blackness, although it is never named as such. In the essay "Hauntological Blues: Little Axe," published on his blog and in *Ghosts of My Life*, he comments on African American artist Skip McDonald's project Little Axe, noting that "the voices of the living harmonise with the voices of the dead in songs thick with reproach [...] Yet utopian longings also stir in the fetid swamps and unmarked graveyards" (129). Crucially, he points out that "[h]auntology is the proper temporal mode for a history made up of gaps, erased names and sudden abductions" and that Little Axe's "combination of blues and dub [...] [superimposes] two corners of the Black Atlantic over one another" (132). In an essay on the documentary *Handsworth Songs* (1986), directed by John Akomfrah and produced by the Black Audio Film Collective, he comments with the same perspicacity on the use of a "dub-refracted cut-up version of 'Jerusalem'" that "the track makes a bid for an account of Englishness from which 'blackness', far from being something that can be excluded,

becomes instead the only possible fulfilment of the millenarian promise of Blake's revolutionary poem" (*Ghosts* 223).[18] In "The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology" (2013), Fisher uses *sonic hauntology* to discuss what he "derived – it would probably be better to say sampled – from Derrida's *Specters of Marx*" and maintains that it "confront[s] 'white' culture with the kind of temporal disjunction that has been constitutive of the Afrodiasporic experience since Africans were first abducted by slavers and projected from their own lifeworld into the abstract space-time of Capital" (44, 46). Juxtaposing hauntology and Afrofuturism, Fisher argues that they are "two sides of the same double-faced phenomenon," insofar as Afrofuturism "unravels any linear model of the future," which conceives of what is to come as "plastic, stretchable and prophetic" (46, 47). All three texts note that blackness originates in a fragmentation of space and time, which continues to be constitutive to it; all three texts note that the works produced by these black artists are nevertheless expressive of "utopian longings," the "millenarian promise" and a non-linear, "prophetic" future.

In 2012, former Home Secretary Theresa May announced that the then-government was implementing new and punitive immigration policies. Six years later, in 2018, these same policies resulted in more than one hundred elderly members of the Windrush Generation being wrongly detained or deported; other black Britons lost access to work, medical treatments, or homes ("The Historical Roots"). Named for the ship MV Empire Windrush, which sailed from Jamaica to London in 1948, the Windrush Generation refers to Commonwealth citizens who arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1971. Now known as the Windrush Scandal, the affair was indeed a haunting, which, as Derrida would have it, revealed a foundational instability. The Windrush Scandal became a central focus of antiracist activism, generating protests and poetry. An example is the poet Roger Robinson's "Citizen I," which begins with a wry, exasperated speaker listing events central to the black

[18] Notably, John Akomfrah's first solo exhibition, in 2012, was called "Hauntologies." Moreover, if my claim is that black British people are rarely viewed through a hauntological lens, I should note that Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective are an exception. Kass Banning's "The Nine Muses: Recalibrating Migratory Aesthetics" (2015) and Stoffel Debuysere's "Signs of Struggle, Songs of Sorrow: Notes on the Politics of Uncertainty in the Films of John Akomfrah" (2015) look at, respectively, how the spectres of colonialism in Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* nevertheless suggest postcolonial futures; and how disappointment, loss, and mourning can be expressive of a "resistance to closure" (76).

British experience and their own life, before punctuating the sentence with a reference to the Windrush Scandal:

> So, after slavery, colonialism, two world wars,
> teddy boys, skinheads, rivers of blood speech,
> neo-nazis, thatcher, 3 kids, 5 grandkids, a cosy
> council house, 20 floors up, a small pension,
> now you want to send me home. (43)

"Oh Woooow!" the speaker exclaims, underlining what is framed as the government's ("you") audacity. The speaker also collapses time – slavery and colonialism in the past are as close a point of reference as the "3 kids" and the "small pension" in the present – and appears to view personal and collective experiences as coterminous. This precarious relationship to time and place, the poem implies, is the foundation on which the "cosy/council house" stands, and the basis for black British citizenship:

> [...] From the slaveships to world wars,
> to the underground and the hospitals, it's always
> been about the labour, never about the living.
> Cheap muscles and blood to build you an empire. (43)

The black Briton is still regarded as a source of free or cheap labour, the speaker maintains, devalued and commodified, the human form disarticulated into "muscles and blood." Then, having been "wrung [...] out," the "cargo" is shipped back. The black experience in Britain, as portrayed in "Citizen I," is one in which the boundary between the past and the present is permeable, emphasised by the fact that "[e]very second street name is a shout out to my captors" (43). There is no escaping the violent history through which black people became British, nor that through which they became black. Spectres of slavers linger on the street corners, and in this place and time, which have both proven to be fundamentally unstable, one could at any point be returned to them.

Framing hauntology as English or British without questioning the ideological underpinnings of those identities risks inadvertently establishing conceptual boundaries and literal borders that the spectre, due to its nature, cannot help but cross. More than that, it risks reifying and essentialising nationality, with the effect of excluding Black, Asian and other ethnic minorities from Britishness; ignoring the material and epistemic violence, historical and ongoing, that is perpetuated by British state-formation; and, finally, undermining hauntology as a form of ethics and future-making. Even a more playful and progressive British nationalism – an "alternative heritage," as per Sexton, that focuses on the occult, the esoteric, and disinterring buried traditions (572) – can feed into the same regressive ideas it ostensibly critiques.

Ultimately, I find it especially pertinent to problematise nationalisms and national identity in a political moment defined by a severe backlash against immigration, and when repeated political attacks against migrants in parliament have been echoed by physical attacks against black and brown people in the streets.[19] Certainly there was the sense of the past returning when prime minister Keir Starmer, in 2025, asserted that immigration risked transforming Britain into "an island of strangers" – an allusion, intended or not, to Conservative politician Enoch Powell's infamous, and infamously racist, "Rivers of blood" speech from 1968, referenced in Roger Robinson's "Citizen I".[20] While Starmer expresses regret, claiming that he "wouldn't have used those words if I had known they were, or even would be interpreted as an echo of Powell," the incident is a troubling one (Nevett and Zeffman). Which post-or-neocolonial ghosts move through contemporary British

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[19] During the campaign surrounding Britain's exit from the EU, for example, anti-immigration rhetoric spiked, which several researchers linked to a concurrent spike in incidents of race-related hate crimes ("'Record hate crimes'"). In the summer of 2024, false information blaming the murders of three girls in Southport on an asylum seeker went viral, sparking violent riots that were spurred on by far-right and fascist activists. Rioters attacked mosques and set fire to hotels believed to be housing migrants, all in the name of "[wanting their] country back" (White; Picheta; Riddell). Again, I want to emphasise that these incidents of interpersonal racist attacks cannot be dissociated from a political establishment that stokes and caters to anti-immigrant sentiments in rhetoric and policy.

[20] Specifically, Powell made the claim that (white) Britons would be "made strangers in their own country" (Nevett and Zeffman).

social and political life, and which histories of violence do they evoke and activate? How are those histories of violence related to the material circumstances of their production? Lastly, how, why and when can those spectres be traced and situated historically, and to what purpose? Returning to "Citizen I," Robinson is clearly attempting to address some of those questions, explicitly linking the Windrush Scandal to anti-immigrant rhetoric, fascist organising, the rise of neoliberalism under Thatcher, and – powering it all – the creation and subsequent exploitation of a racialised workforce.

Robinson is one of many black British writers to speak to and with the spectres that haunt Britain's past and futures. As Steven Blevins argues, many writers and artists "bring us back to the postcolonial through a new materialist historiography of slavery and the slave trade, a creative engagement with the past essential to understanding the intricate national and transnational circuits that comprise present-day Britain" (9). This historiographic turn, argues Blevins – and I would agree – "[homes] in on the governing homologies between particularized and localized acts of violence [...] expanding the ways in which we might think about redress as a collective well beyond the parameters of legal accountability as economic calculability" (17). These artists aim for the future through the past, and, in doing so, initiate and broaden a conversation about justice in the Derridean sense.

Despite their interest in fluctuating temporalities, black British writers are rarely discussed in relation to hauntology, unlike their black Atlantic counterparts writing in and from North American, African and Caribbean contexts. The book *Gothic Hauntology: Everyday Hauntings and Epistemological Desire* (2023) by Joakim Wrethed, for example, which reads both older and contemporary Gothic works through the prism of hauntology, includes no black British author.[21] Gina Wisker, in her *Contemporary Women's Ghost Stories: Spectres, Revenants, Ghostly Returns* (2022) only dedicates half a page to Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching* (2009), despite having written extensively on black British women's writing in her *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing: A Critical Introduction* (2017). Nor

[21] Wrethed's focus is gothic, not necessarily British, literature; my reason for nevertheless including him is that he is in conversation with contemporary British writing on hauntology, chiefly Coverley, but also Fisher and Shaw.

is hauntology (defined by Wisker as the way in which "past writings, revelations and creative responses to events and relationships of power [...] haunt the texts" [10]) used to analyse Oyeyemi's novel.

In contrast, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) has long drawn the attention of critics who explore the intersection of blackness and spectrality. (Wisker writes extensively on *Beloved* in *Contemporary Women's Ghost Stories*.) Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000), for example, analyses who resides in "America's 'space of death," and explores the artists, such as Morrisson, who "are raising the dead, allowing them to speak, and providing them with the agency of physical bodies in order to tell the story of a death-in-life" (Holland 5). Juda Bennett's *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (2014) approaches Morrison's spectres through the lens of queer theory, arguing that the ghost – out of joint, out of place, and a locus of occluded desires – is necessarily also a queer figure.[22]

The Canada-based poet M. NourbeSe Philip, who refers to her haunting and haunted poetry book *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* (2008) as "hauntological" and "a work of haunting, a wake of sorts" (201), has received critical attention in "A Caribbean Hauntology: The Sensorial Art of Joscelyn Gardner and M. NourbeSe Philip" (2018) by Guillermina de Ferrari; "On Recovering the Past: Textual 'Reversibility' in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" (2021) by Deborah Goldgaber; and "The Archive and Affective Memory in M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*" by Jenny Sharpe (2013). Writer Dionne Brand is discussed alongside Edwidge Danticat in "Palimpsests of Ancestral Memories: Black Women's Collective Identity Development in Short Stories by Edwidge Danticat and Dionne Brand" by Saskia Fürst (2017), who employs hauntology specifically to address ancestral memory and gendered, intergenerational trauma, and in Franca Bernabei's "Transatlantic poetics of haunting" (2011), this time alongside Marie-Célie Agnant, also in the context of (colonial) memory. Ayo A. Coly's book *Postcolonial Hauntologies: African Women's Discourses*

[22] For more on ghosts and Toni Morrison, see, for example, "'Your buried ghosts have a way of tripping you up': Revisioning and Mothering in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Speculative Horror," also by Gina Wisker (2005), or "Ghosts and Shattered Bodies, or What Does it Mean To Still Be Haunted by Southern Literature?" (2005) by Patricia Yaeger.

of the Female Body (2019) traces the spectre of Sarah Baartman through African women's literature and performance, and Cheryl Stobie's "Sisters and spirits: The postcolonial gothic in Angelina n Sithebe's *holy hill*" (2011) examines religion, spirituality and spirits in a South African context.

There exist, of course, critical works that engage with black British writing and hauntology, though they are far fewer, and primarily focused on prose. Katy Shaw's *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (2018) dedicates one chapter to Zadie Smith, proceeding from Derridean hospitality. Polo B. Moji's 2019 article "The hauntological imaginary in Bernadine [sic] Evaristo's *Soul Tourists*" (2005) reads haunting as resistance to the nationalist homogenisation of place and time, while Stef Craps' "Learning to Live with Ghosts; Postcolonial Haunting and Mid-Mourning in David Dabydeen's 'Turner' and Fred *D'Aguiar's Feeding the Ghosts*" (2010) focuses, like myself, on Derrida's "ethico-political practice of anamnestic solidarity with the oppressed of the past *and* the present" (467), and the authors' enactment of that practice. In "'Glimpses of Arcadia': queer spectralities in Shola von Reinhold's *Lote*" (2024), Jonas Kellerman explores queer subjectivities and temporalities, and "The Dark Lady's survival in contemporary Black women's writing" (2024) by Sabine Schülting explores the persistent presence of Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets in Zadie Smith, Bernardine Evaristo and Caroline Randall Williams.

Dominic Davies briefly discusses hauntology in his article "The City of the Missing: Poetic Responses to the Grenfell Fire" (2023), but only references Fisher's definition of the term, making no mention of Derrida. Sarah Lawson Welsh, in "Jay Bernard's *Surge*: Archival Interventions in Black British Poetry" (2021), also refers back to Fisher over Derrida, which I consider further in the final chapter of this study. Finally, *Postcolonial Ghosts* (2023), edited by Mélanie Joseph-Vilain and Judith Misrahi-Barak, includes an incisive essay by John McLeod on Jackie Kay and Pauline Melville, in which Kay's poetry collection *The Adoption Papers* (1991) and her novel *Trumpet* (1998) are discussed with reference to spectral subjectivities. Altogether, there is no comprehensive study on hauntology and black British writing, nor are black British writers commonly studied alongside other black writers in the context of transnational, postcolonial and spectral imaginaries.

In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Gilroy levelled anti-nationalist, anti-essentialist criticism at his own field of cultural studies, remarking on an "evasive, but nonetheless potent... quiet cultural nationalism which pervades the work of some radical thinkers" (4). He contends that "this crypto-nationalism means that [these thinkers] are often disinclined to consider the cross catalytic or transverse dynamics of racial politics as a significant element in the formation and reproduction of English national identities," and that the result is that "[t]hese formations are treated as if they spring, fully formed, from their own special viscera" (4). Gilroy identifies an inclination across the political spectrum to treat the black British community, and its relationship to white Britain, as "little more than a collision between two fully formed and mutually exclusive cultural communities" (7), which risks perpetuating ideas of "ethnic particularism" and, potentially, intellectual and academic segregation.

As a corrective to these tendencies of thought in cultural studies, Gilroy suggested serious inquiry into *the black Atlantic*, his term for the transnational, dynamic and heterogenous formation of the black diaspora. The black Atlantic, Gilroy extrapolates, is made up of the "stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering" (3). In his formulation, it is an ongoing, political and politicising process of cultural and intellectual exchange brought into being by transnational histories of racial oppression, in and through the Atlantic routes of the slave trade. The black diaspora is brought into relation not only through modalities such as nationality and ethnicity – though these are indeed present and potent – but also through the way blackness is "felt, produced, communicated, and remembered" (3). Gilroy's analysis ensures that there is space for the local and particular ways in which black communities have come together and formed, and the intricate movement of people, politics and art, through which the black Atlantic has come (and is continuously brought) into existence.

Significantly for this study, Gilroy envisages this movement as a ship, a multifaceted image that calls to mind both separation *and* connection, the Middle Passage *and* the "various projects for the redemptive return to an African homeland" (4). Through its journey, the ship potentially connects the communities it has dispersed. Viewed as such,

the ship is a gathering of peoples, politics and cultures, advancing together in time. Oriented towards the future, with no definite or safe harbour, it becomes a powerful syncretic chronotope: the inescapable connection to the slave ship turns it into an image of past suffering, while its trajectory indicates the potential for change and redemption. In the present, it carries that same charge of uncertainty and hope. Part vehicle, part dwelling, it hints at both homelessness and the ongoing quest or search for a home. The ship cannot arrive because it has no one place to go. A port that could hold all its passengers does not (yet) exist; instead, people onboard are *with* each other, relying on one another for what is to come. During the Windrush Scandal, when individuals abruptly lost homes and livelihoods – after living in Britain for some fifty years – the ground beneath their feet was revealed to be the pitching, unsteady deck of a familiar ship. "Truth is you were always planning my departure," sneers the speaker in Roger Robinson's "Citizen I," "from the moment I walked down the gangplank" (43). With one abrupt change in policy, designed to make British citizenship less accessible or desirable for potential new migrants, it became apparent that the Caribbean immigrants who had arrived at the invitation of the British government were still lost at sea.

At this point, one might want to raise an objection – that the ship, implying as it does one path and purpose for all passengers, is likely to elide differences and contestations within the group. Gilroy raises this issue when he asks, "Are the inescapable pluralities involved in the movements of black peoples, in Africa and in exile, ever to be synchronised?" (30) To be synchronised, of course, is to carry out *at the same time*. But time, as Derrida submits, is out of joint; the spectre's gaze "de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony" revealing a "disjointed or dis-adjusted time without which there would be neither history, nor event, nor promise of justice" (*Specters* 6, 214). These movements lack synchronicity because, I would argue, the ship is both spectral and haunted; in its belly is not only the living black diaspora, but also all its innumerable, unnameable dead, and their hands are also at the wheel.

In *Living with Ghosts* (2022), a collection of texts that reflect on hauntology in relation to Africa's colonial past and possible futures, KJ Abudu summarises:

> Both of these violent modern processes [the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism], which engendered disparate African diasporic populations in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, and accelerated Euro-America's accumulation of wealth via its rapacious extraction of the continent's natural resources, have in turn eroded and ruptured the very spatial integrity of "Africa" [...] Consequently, Africa [...] becomes a space that is at once physical and idealised, there and not-there, contained and dispersed, in other words, ghostly and discontinuous. (74-75)

The black Atlantic is one manifestation of this "ghostly and discontinuous" space, as Gilroy underscores when remarking on the ubiquity of spectral exchanges in Black Atlantic art. What Gilroy refers to as a "turn towards death" is discernible in how "black cultural forms have hosted and even cultivated a dynamic rapport with the presence of death and suffering" (198), an example of which, taken from *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* (1845), is the choice to embrace death rather than submit to slavery. Laura Chrisman has criticised Gilroy's characterisation of that turn towards death, arguing that he "[converts] a willingness to risk death into a positive orientation, a desire for, death," and neglects that "such a desire is articulated, as in the Douglass narrative, within the matrix of a spiritual redemptionism" (500-1). Further, Chrisman cautions against relying on "a negative utopianism" in which "only the principle and representation of negativity (associated with the finality of death, absolute termination) can indicate [...] an 'authentic' emancipatory future condition of being," especially given the "immense explicit emphasis given to positive Utopian notions of spiritual redemption, solace and the imaginings of actual future social transformation" (501). One way of approaching these seemingly positions, however, is to recall the spectre's agency, the effectivity of "what seems to remain as ineffective" (Derrida, *Specters* 10). Perhaps a rapport with death and suffering does not need to preclude notions of affirmation, redemption and justice; perhaps those who are lost can be found to act, within and through the living.

To my mind, it is this dynamic – the living and the dead acting and re-acting in relation to one another, the former posited as inheritors, mourners and political agents with a duty to respond to the spectre – that necessitates returning to an understanding of hauntology and hauntological time as primarily aligned with, and interested in, ethics. It is also through this dynamic that the connection between hauntology and the cultural and political productions of the black Atlantic becomes

apparent: in both, there is a shared understanding of time and space as fundamentally disrupted, of the centrality of the dead to the living, and of freedom to come.

Not content with a world in which racial injustice is merely addressed, there is, in the works produced by several writers of the black Atlantic, a sense of the messianic, of a desire for a world beyond this world. Fisher commented on this in his astute observations of the "utopian" strain in Little Axe, the "millenarian promise" in the re-mixed "Jerusalem." Gilroy, too, uses the term *utopian*, although what he describes hews closer to this study's understanding of the Derridean messianic: "The issue of how utopias are conceived is more complex not least because they strive continually to move beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual and discursive" (37). Moreover, Gilroy reminds readers, utopias formulated by or in the black Atlantic are by necessity opaque because they were "[c]reated under the very nose of the overseers" (37). That opacity, too, aligns Gilroy's utopia with the Derridean messianic – whatever it is, or is going to be, it cannot proceed predictably from existing dreams and desires. The ship travels onwards, while the promise of the horizon retreats, which is why the ship must continue its journey.

Finally, the black Atlantic is shaped by the brutal circumstances of its conception, which is to say the colonisation of Africa and the subsequent classification of peoples as less than or other than human. The "African" identity, and blackness itself, was *born* out of Western exploitation of the continent, its natural resources, and its peoples, that is, from the process of its *dying*. The correlation between birth and death, between becoming and coming undone, again directs attention to the hauntological foundations of black identity formation. "First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat," writes Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, "This boat is a womb, a womb abyss... This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death" (*Poetics* 6). A member of an African nation enters the ship, but emerges as an object – a commodity or a corpse – and that ship is still in circulation.

Staying Alive to the Dead

A term that frequently appears in the academic debates about black life is *social death*, first used in that context by American sociologist Orlando Patterson. In his study *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), Patterson argues that the tendency of "almost all slaveholding societies was to define the slave as a socially dead person" (38). To be socially dead, in Patterson's definition, is to be forbidden from organising within one's community, or to involve oneself in social life and politics, and being forcibly separated from all bonds of sociality. It is also to be deprived of the power over one's own life or death. In recent years, there has been an intense discussion as to the usefulness of the term when applied to contemporary black life, led by a group of scholars popularly known as Afropessimists. Jared Sexton, who is one of those scholars, describes black life as "the social life of social death" (15), while his colleague, Frank Wilderson III, makes the claim that "Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness" (225-6). According to Wilderson, the Black/Slave is that which gives the category of Human its meaning – and so "Human Life is dependent on Black death for its existence" (228-229).

Although it is impossible to navigate the terrain of blackness, black death and spectrality without at least referencing the Afropessimist use of social death, I will refrain from using the term and its attendant theories in this study for a few reasons. Briefly, this understanding of blackness projects what is indubitably an American experience onto the entire diaspora, exhibiting little interest in the African continent, with its complex, contested history of slavery, colonialism, resistance, rebellions and projects of nation-building and world-making; it often dismisses attempts at situating racism historically and materially; and, lastly, it does not account for the ways in which black people in the West are embedded (and invested) in imperialism and the attendant exploitation of workers and resources in the Global South. As writer Kevin Ochieng Okoth points out, "it precludes the possibility of [...] anti-imperialist solidarity" and the notion of "political resistance, because the very foundations of political discourse are inherently anti-Black" (ch.2).

In thinking about black life in relation to death, I find Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) more germane to the project at hand. For Sharpe, black life is, if not the social life of social death, necessarily lived through its *proximity* to death, and, importantly, through its *duty* towards the dead. "What does it look like, entail, and mean to attend to, care for, comfort, and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death, life lived in the presence of death [...]?" (38). Sharpe places in one category the dead, the dying, and individuals and groups who are vulnerable to death, rejecting a strict delineation between them. This category is spectrality itself, which, rather than being of or for the dead, is where (and when) death and life is held in tension and kept in intimate contact. Openness towards that contact emphasises that a politics of liberation must recognise the impossibility of consigning the dead to the past, or separating oneself meaningfully from them. When someone passes away, the common advice given to the living is to mourn them and then move on; but, as Derrida has shown, being itself is mourning. In the same vein, Sharpe suggests that moving into the future must involve not moving *on* from the dead but moving *with* the dead – being in the wake. This is not construed as failed mourning, either, but "[a] mourning in fact and by right interminable, without possible normality, without reliable limit" (*Specters* 121). The dead must also be carried and cared for.

The transtemporal and transnational (and moved or moving) nature of blackness is essential to Sharpe's thinking. Like Gilroy, she deploys the figure of the ship, or, more specifically, the *wake* of the ship, the movement engendered in the water by a departing body. In Sharpe's usage, the wake is multivalent, metaphorical, but also concrete: it is what marks the passage of slave ships, a ritual of collective mourning after a death, and staying conscious and alert to danger, being awake. In my reading, Sharpe's wake appears to be in communication with Derrida's concept of the *trace*, which Fisher describes as such: "Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does" (*Ghosts* 17-18). However, he adds, the concept of hauntology, "explicitly brings into play the question of time in a way that had not quite been the case with the trace or *différance*" (18). Sharpe's wake enacts something similar by marking

an after (a past) and an absence (the ship) that impinges on and sets the conditions for what is present – and what may come.[23] In what can only be seen as a suitably deconstructive turn, however, the multiple meanings of wake contravene a stable invocation of it as trace because, depending on the definition of wake, the term conjures an ungovernable number of resonances and reactions. The wake, it seems, is part of the spectral order it comments on.

My reason for making these connections, between the wake and the trace, between the black radical tradition and hauntology, is not to establish a simple one-to-one correlation, but to begin to indicate how the black artists I foreground in this study signal the presence of the spectral in their work, and why they choose to do so. If there has been a critical tendency to look past black British writers' spectral strategies and hauntological interventions, it is, perhaps, partially because they employ alternative metaphorical systems to those common in stories about ghosts and hauntings. Rather than the derelict manor or the blasted heath, the sea – the element of water – presages the arrival, return and persistence of the past. As per the song, Britannia did not only rule its colonies in Asia, Africa, the Americas, Oceania and the Caribbean, but also the oceanic pathways between them. The ship often takes the place of the haunted house; the sea, not the sepulchre, is the gravesite in which the restless dead are gathered. The bones of the drowned and unburied – those who, living or dead, were jettisoned from slave ships – are entirely submerged, making the ocean itself appear timeless and placeless. Glissant makes this very point when he writes that "the entire ocean, the entire sea [...] make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green" (*Poetics* 6).

Oceanic time is time out of joint; its surface is an eternal present. "Where are your monuments, your battles, your martyrs?" asks Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott in his poem "The Sea is History" (1978). In response to that question, the poem's speaker dives into the depths of the sea, declaring: "The sea/has locked them up. The sea is History" (364). In the sea, which becomes a synecdoche of the Caribbean, lost

[23] That temporal element is also present in Saidiya Hartman's discussion of "the afterlife of slavery," which refers to the devaluation of black life in America – "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" are indications of the past never being over (*Lose Your Mother* 6).

martyrs have fused with the elements, and history has been replaced with their biblical or mythological counterparts. Ultimately, the water is not free from time, place, or ideology, but remains a spectral, dis-adjusted and transformative space. Flesh, ferried across it, turns into money; a body, dumped in it, transforms into a thing; and the past comes back like a wave.

2. A Spectral Poetics of Relation: Reading Poetry Through Hauntology

> Otherwise it rests on the good conscience of having done one's duty, it loses the chance of the future, of the promise or the appeal, of the desire also […] of this desert-like messianism (without content and without identifiable messiah), of this also abyssal desert […]
> – Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1993)

> History is on the wing
> the past and present form a ring
> and time is but a fractal thiiiiiiiing
>   in the land before the story-o
> – Jay Bernard, *The Red and Yellow Nothing* (2016)

Can ghosts manifest in or as writing? Colin Davis offers a possible answer to that question: "Ghosts are a privileged theme because they allow an insight into texts and textuality as such" (378). Literature is in continual communication with that which is neither living nor dead, neither present nor absent, and invites readers into a space in which time and place are protean and evasive. As Katy Shaw points out, "The indeterminable ontology of literature means that it is an appropriate site to open up ideas about possibility and to challenge boundaries of space and time" (16). If everything that *is* exists only in relation to what *is not* (quite), literature – existing in a continuous and expanding textual network of histories, ideologies, languages and systems – emerges as a particularly haunted medium. Moreover, what can be said to be present, tangible and displayed in a literary text (a character, object, or idea) is simultaneously absent, immaterial and deferred. Arguably, this is particularly true of poetry, which often uses a variety of formal and linguistic strategies to draw attention to the play between opacity and clarity, stability and slippage, and linearity and circularity.

This chapter proposes a method for reading poetry *hauntologically*, that is, reading poetry with special attention given to the formal and linguistic strategies alluded to above, as well as to the third sense of the future – the messianic as irrepressible, absolute alterity – which

is also (as in Derrida) expressive of an ethical duty to the other. As Davis submits, "[The] ghost's secret is not a puzzle to be solved," but "the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future" (379). For this reason, I put Derridean hauntology and poetry in relation to one another via Édouard Glissant's understanding of the *poetics of relation*, an approach that underscores *errantry* as the basis of both identity-formation and world-building. Like Derrida, Glissant emphasises being as occurring in relation (rather than in opposition) to the other, and I extrapolate from that proposition in order to recognise the spectre always already residing in the poetics of relation. Lastly, using what I term a *spectral poetics of relation*, I read the poet Jay Bernard's pamphlet *The Red and Yellow Nothing* (2016), focusing on its conceptualisation and staging of errantry, spectrality and possibility.

"We cry our cry of poetry": A Spectral Poetics of Relation

While walking along the black beach at Le Diamant on his native Martinique, Glissant experiences a ghostly encounter. It involves a young man, apparently alive, but arguably spectral in appearance and behaviour. "One morning he [...] began to pace up and down the shore," Glissant writes, noting that the man refuses to stop or speak when addressed, and that he ignores his concerned family's attempts at "break[ing] down the barrier of total silence" (*Poetics* 122). Instead, the young man continues his pacing, rapidly losing weight and, presumably, becoming even more "ghostly" in appearance (122). Striding along the shore, where "the edge of the sea [...] represents the alternation (but one that is illegible) between order and chaos," the silent young man is positioned at the edge not just of order and chaos, but of life and death. Glissant tries to communicate with "this absence" with a gesture, and receives a "minute, imperceptible signal" from the young man in response (*Poetics* 122-23). It is this enigmatic response that launches Glissant into speculation about violence, discourse and power: "I thought of the people struggling within this speck of the world against silence and obliteration," he begins, before returning once more to the shore:

> Then, in this circularity *I* haunt, I turned my efforts toward seeing the beach's backwash into the nearby eddying void as the equivalent of the circling of this man completely withdrawn into his motor forces [...] I thought everywhere, and in how many different modes, it is the same necessity to fit into the chaotic drive of totality that is at work [...] I thought about [...] the fear, the wasting away, the tortured extinction, the obstinate means of resistance, the naïve belief, the famines that go unmentioned [...] and so many other infinite variations of life and death. (124-25, emphasis added)

Through establishing an ambiguous reciprocity with the apparition marching up and down the beach, Glissant becomes both haunted and haunting, his diffracting consciousness establishing connections to and between things which are there and not there, seen and unseen. This is a haunting that Glissant consents to, and neither interrupts nor resolves: throughout the entirety of the text, the wanderer's motives remain obscure, allowing speculation to proliferate, inside and outside of the text. To borrow from Derrida, Glissant, walking on the black beach, is "in the commerce without commerce with ghosts" (*Specters* xviii), and it allows him (and the reader) to travel between sensory and spectral worlds.

Poetics of Relation begins at the point in which a form of death generates a form of life: in the "womb abyss" of the slave ship that is "pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death" (6). Glissant explores which structures of thought and feeling the abyss produces in the populations that have emerged from it. The ship, visualised as mother and murderer, becomes both the vessel for an ongoing disaster and the possibility for future redemption. "For us," Glissant proposes, "the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown [...] This is why we stay with poetry" (8). Experience of the abyss becomes the foundation of a crucial, collectively held understanding of unknowability and the "knowledge of Relation within the Whole" (8).

To this, I would add that the experience offers insight into death's many and complex reconfigurations of and entanglements with spatiotemporal disturbances and disjuncture. The people who were abducted from Africa and brought to the Caribbean were, as Mark Fisher has pointed out, inserted not just into the plantation, but into the plantation economy, or "the abstract space-time of Capital" ("Metaphysics of Crackle" 46). Death haunts these populations, but so, importantly, does poetry. "We know ourselves as part and as crowd," Glissant writes,

"in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone" (9). Here, Paul Gilroy's chronotope of the ship is recalled and transfigured: one ship becomes several open boats, suggesting dispersal and asynchrony. A new mode of being in the world has been delivered from the "womb abyss," one that proceeds from being unaligned, out of joint, and suspended between worlds. And although it has been a painful delivery, one that, paradoxically, has been generated through death, this fundamentally spectral subject should not force itself back into alignment, because its very existence prompts us to conceive of a different relationship to the other. In short, the local, Caribbean experience can be applied to (and better) our understanding of being or becoming in the world.

The abyss also appears in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, as a "desert-like messianism (without content and without identifiable messiah)," and as the "*abyssal* desert" (33). This "abyssal desert," too, can be conceived of as a projection into the unknown, an opening that retreats as we travel towards it. Despite the overt theological connotations of the word messianism, it is not supposed to signify religion or faith – a fact Derrida repeatedly underscores – but a "structural messianism," the promise of the future-to-come that makes the future possible (*Specters* 73).[24] Because it is a promise, it must be kept; but to remain a promise, it cannot be fulfilled. Instead, the messianic is an opening to "what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited *as such* [...] to the event as the foreigner itself, to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope – and this is the very place of spectrality" (82).

Significantly, Derrida connects the messianic to Marxism specifically through the promise, which, as Werner Hamacher observes, "is historically the first promise which made a claim on unlimited universality in freedom and justice, the first and only not biased by racisms, nationalisms, cultisms or class ideologies" (209). That world, if or when it comes into being, must still maintain its promise, because that is how it can oppose not only its own ossification, but the foreclosure of the future – and of justice. "Otherwise it rests on the good conscience of having done one's duty," Derrida points out (33). It is through the

[24] Here, it should be noted that Derrida borrows the term from the Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), whose conception of history and historical time brought together elements of Marxism and messianic Judaism (Traverso 375).

abyss, a rift in this world – instantiated by Marx and experienced by his inheritors – that something utterly new, something entirely unknown, can enter.

In juxtaposing hauntology and the poetics of relation, my intention is not to equate them, nor to imply that the differences between them are negligible. It is to formulate a possible theoretical approach to the work of poets who, like Derrida and Glissant, are expressly interested in exploring and expressing how to "live *with* ghosts" (Derrida, *Specters* xviii). Reading Glissant alongside Derrida opens up the spectral aspects of Glissant's poetics of relation, which, in turn, can be used to engage with the spectral – and the messianic – in literary texts. Glissant defines relation as something moveable and moving, "totality in evolution, whose order is continually in flux and whose disorder one can imagine forever" (*Poetics* 133). Reading as relation, then, entails acknowledging that the text and the person encountering it are also in evolution over and across time. Glissant makes this point explicit when he asserts that: "Literary textual practice [...] represents an opposition between two opacities: the irreducible opacity of the text [...] and the always evolving opacity of the author or a reader" (115). Lack of closure represents a preservation of multiplicity, unlike what Glissant refers to as "reductive transparency" (18). To read with respect to the spectral and relational, then, is to read not for clarity, but with an eye to (all forms of) possibility.

To concepts like *evolution* and *opacity*, Glissant adds *errantry* and *errant thought* (18). Errantry is movement without a determined forward trajectory, movement that is not preoccupied with search, discovery or conquest. "The thinking of errantry," Glissant suggests, "conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it" (21). Similarly, errantry rejects notions of rootedness, or the root, which is described as "a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it" (11). The root as origin forecloses the possibilities of relation, which is why Glissant instead employs the image of the *rhizome* and rhizomatic thought, borrowed from French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Rhizomatic thought, "an enmeshed root system [...] with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently," allows for the extension of the self in relation to the other, without opposition, domination or absorption (11). Glissant also rejects *filiation*, which is the relationship of descent – familial, cultural, linguistic – and

closely affiliated with the root. As an approach to reading that privileges evolution, opacity, errantry and expansion, relation provides us with a perspective into texts and textuality by directing our attention to:

> the dialectics between the oral and the written, the thought of multilingualism, the balance between the present moment and duration, the questioning of literary genres, the power of the baroque, the nonprojectile imaginary construct. For, in reality, Relation is not an absolute toward which every work would strive but a totality [...] that through its poetic and practical and unceasing force attempts to be perfected, to be spoken, simply, that is, to be complete. (35)

Glissant's poetics of relation is "directly in contact with everything possible" in how it understands languages, genres, modes of writing, and time(s). Speaking with and to the spectral, the possible is not just what the living can imagine, but also that which was once imagined by the nameless and numberless dead, "for whom a world, that is to say, a possible infinity or a possible indefinity of experiences was open" ("Spectrographies" 32, 42). Behind everything possible, then, is some impossible spirit. A spectral poetics of relation, in addition to reading with and for opacity, evolution, errantry and expansion, must also remain open to the inherited, invisible infinities of what once was, and may yet come. While this thinking can be applied to the analysis of any literary text, it is my contention that poetry's shifting, layered temporalities makes it particularly suitable for such a reading.

Spectral time is out of joint, "historical, to be sure" but not "docilely given a date" (*Specters* 3). Justice manifests through and in this untimeliness – "to be just" is to be "beyond the living present in general," in a "spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time" (xix). A spectral moment is resistant to, and cannot be subsumed by, the time of capital; it recalls us to other times, other futures, and other subjectivities. Arguably, poetry stages and enacts time – though, it should be added, not every poem or poetic genre does so to the same extent. Still, common formal tactics such as assonance, dissonance, rhyme, half-rhyme, alliteration, allusions and repetition create a dense textual and linguistic weave; the denseness of verse, the compression of expression and experience, relies on a simultaneous *temporal* compression. It should be said that different formal strategies also have

different relationships to and in time – rhyme circles back, alliteration speeds up, allusion reaches into the past. Reading a poem, then, occasions a temporal split: in the present, one reads backwards and forwards simultaneously, anticipating the future (the second half of a rhyme, a concluding rhythm) by looking to the past. As readers of poetry, we perform a limited, literary revolution: an evolution (of comprehension, the part's relationship to the whole), a return, and a re-evaluation. Perhaps, like Glissant, we do so on a black beach, balanced on the dissolving boundary between extremes.

A reading based on hauntology and the poetics of relation cannot, then, result in a stable, definitive list or framework with which one can approach any and every poem tentatively labelled by the critic as hauntological. By necessity, one's reading must remain flexible and elastic, while paying particular attention to seemingly repressed voices, histories, and ideologies, to disappeared bodies and displaced gravesites. The question that has been central to my development of this approach is how to read for the third sense of hauntology, Derrida's temporality of justice, which does not seek to resolve so much as point to a break with "the ordinary course of things, time and history here-now" (Derrida, "Marx & Sons" 249). In what follows of this chapter, I apply this reading through an extended study of Jay Bernard's 2016 pamphlet *The Red and Yellow Nothing*, with particular attention paid to Bernard's "[balancing] of the present moment and duration," their irreverent use of a variety of registers and genres, the notion of errantry and a nonprojectile imaginary construct, to argue that their staging of time proposes a future in which blackness has superseded the racial ideologies that originated it.

"The past and present form a ring": Identity and Errantry in Jay Bernard's *The Red and Yellow Nothing*

Unlike many of the poems in this study, Jay Bernard's slim pamphlet *The Red and Yellow Nothing* is not explicitly concerned with the dead. Instead, it is a polyphonic, frequently absurd and abstruse, prequel to the medieval Middle Dutch poem *Morien*, in which the eponymous young knight sets off on a quest from "the Moorish lands" to locate his

father, Sir Agloval, a knight of the Round Table, and reunite him with Morien's mother (*Red and Yellow* 7). It is a literal search for one's roots, a desperate, increasingly confused hunt for filiation that concludes when its medieval counterpart begins. The pamphlet – which consists of one long poem, separated into thirteen sections of varying lengths and styles – references not only *Morien* but also the sixteenth-century Scottish poet William Dunbar, contemporary rapper Kendrick Lamar, and, as Bernard reveals in a blog post, the video game Super Mario (Bernard "How I did it").

Texts and times converge and contrast in *The Red and Yellow Nothing*, ultimately exposing time itself as a text that is open for interpretation and alteration. Bernard shares in their introduction that *The Red and Yellow Nothing* is designed as "an inquiry into the idea of blackness in Europe before it became synonymous with a less than romantic history," adding that "the particular history that produced the author that reproduces [and in some way contaminates]" the protagonist, Morien, "is not inevitable" (*Red and Yellow* 7). To read it as an example of a spectral poetics of relation transforms a quest that, from the outset, is concerned with filiation, into one defined by errantry and expansion; it turns identity into something relational and mutable, a generic problem rather than an essentialist one.

Partially, the poem does so through the *nothing*, a figure that resides in the text while at the same time gesturing beyond its confines. Bernard's nothing, appearing in the guise of a black woman, becomes that which cannot be known, Davis' "structural openness or address" aimed at the living (379), and is consequently expressive of the spectre's extreme alterity. Significantly, the black woman is depicted as a possibility that haunts the world of the text, and, at the same time, the world in which the text is read; she is both the void, the nothing, and the promised or potential future, an abyss that recedes as it is approached. The result is a poem that insists on emphasising the friction between two temporalities – the time and text of the medieval poem, in which "blackness in Europe" lacks our contemporary connotations, and the time and text inhabited by its readers – which, in turn, opens up a third and spectral sense through which the reader is encouraged to imagine the non-inevitability of the history of racial oppression. The questions posed in this poem, then, are twofold: whether blackness can ever be understood, or understood to exist, outside of its current

history, and if and how poetical modes of thought can enable such an understanding.

Immediately, *The Red and Yellow Nothing* positions its primary scene as textual, beginning not with words, but punctuation:

.
:

;
,
,
.

Viewed apart from the context of the written sentence, punctuation becomes a visual image rather than communicative symbols; the periods, commas, and colons are reduced to black marks on the paper. It is only after these marks have been made that the protagonist, Morien, makes his appearance: "black from head to toe," he enters "page left on his horse, Young'Un" (9). Morien and the periods, colons and commas that precede him enter "page left," hinting at a possible connection between them. Morien, too, is punctuation without a sentence, a symbol extracted from its expected and communicative context: he is a black man, but also a medieval knight, predating the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its associated repercussions. Blackness has been detached from race. It is up to readers to attempt to place him – to fit him into a set text – and to struggle with and against that impulse, which, like Morien's quest, limits the dynamism of identity and its relationship to (or manifestation as) interlacing, changeable texts.

The visual, then, is presented as being haunted by textuality, and vice versa. The appearance of a comma naturally engenders a search for its sentence, in the same way that a man, "black from head to toe," engenders a search for a particular kind of narrative. But textuality, in its turn, is haunted by the oral. After Morien's introduction, the page is switched for its attendant rhyme, the stage, as a bard "of indeterminate gender" begins to sing:

A silver wind came passing in
the distant land where books begin
where maids are men and hermits siiiiing

in the land before the story-o

Blue grows the darkness-o
    There beneath the daylight-o (9)

In their song, the bard clarifies two things: one, that the "land" in which the story takes place is literary ("where books begin"), and two, that the flexibility offered by that literariness invites a play on tropes and identities ("where maids are men and hermits siiiiing"). Glissant's "dialectics between the oral and the written" come into play in this passage (*Poetics* 35). The long, drawn-out "siiiiing," for example, invokes the ghost of a melody and the absent presence of the body that performs the song. It also alludes to the form of the traditional British folk ballad, which Bernard has confirmed as a point of reference, specifying that they drew inspiration from the two folk ballads "The Well Below the Valley" (as performed by Christy Moore) and "Two Magicians" (from a version uploaded to YouTube by musician Raymond Crooke).

A black man emerges from a Middle Dutch poem. He is introduced through a (parodic) allusion to English folk music. What is constructed, here, is a dense system of textual relations that trouble the notion of neat generic *and* national distinctions – though often set on the British Isles, many Arthurian romances were produced in other parts of Europe – and in which Morien constitutes the disorienting centre.

It should also be noted that both of the ballads referenced through the bard's song connect thematically to the protagonist's conundrum: how to locate his father, Sir Agloval, and return him to his mother, a quest for legitimacy through filiation, or the (re)discovery of one's root. In the first ballad, "The Well Below the Valley," a young woman is accused of murdering her children, conceived as a result of incest with her brother, uncle and father. In the second, a blacksmith comes upon a young lady and, identifying her as a virgin, declares his intention to rape her. The lady's attempts to transform herself – into a dove, or fly, or ship – are trounced by the blacksmith, and she is eventually forced back into her original body, and violated. If "The Well Below the Valley" is concerned with the catastrophe that follows improper filiation – a family that consumes itself – then "Two Magicians" proposes that, regardless of its multiple metamorphoses, there is no escape

from the vulnerability of marginalised embodiment. *The Red and Yellow Nothing*, however, responding to these same concerns, reaches different conclusions, revelling in the confusion, subversion and transformation poetry can enact.

In *The Red and Yellow Nothing*, time is one of many possible texts, and can be read alongside other times. Consequently, the "distant land" in which the action takes place, the *where*, is also a *when*, the beginning of a book. The bard elaborates on their view of time in their final verse:

> History is on the wing
> the past and present form a ring
> and time is but a fractal thiiiiiiiing
> in the land before the story-o (10)

If "the past and present form a ring," then the quest for identity through filiation – "Tell me where my father is, or I'll kill you," Morien exclaims to the bard in section two of the poem – can only ever be circular, leading one back to the beginning. The father is not the origin of identity, because identity is scattered and dispersed through time. Time, considered as "a fractal thing," exposes linearity (and through it, the concept of descent) as a fiction, albeit one that the protagonist is invested in establishing. It also gives rise to surprising juxtapositions, as different times overlay and overwrite one another.

One such example comes when Morien aggressively confronts the bard, and the anonymous speaker that introduces each new section of the poem excuses his behaviour by remarking that "maybe we can empathise with the frustration one feels when the local people take one look at you, then hurry away from you before you've finished your sentence" (11). On the one hand, the reader is made to understand this remark through the medieval textual landscape through which Morien moves, and in which a stranger being turned away at the door by the "local people" is simply the effect of an understandable hostility to unknown wanderers. On the other, one is faced with the contemporary story or time, in which black people, and black men in particular, are given "one look" before being dismissed as potential threats. It is through readers that the contact and contrast between those two times is established. Fractal time, as explored in *The Red and Yellow*

Nothing, is kaleidoscopic; past, present, and future splinter and recombine, turning history into a complex, contested space.

Having attacked and possibly murdered the bard, thus expunging the presence whose philosophy appeared to throw the entire quest into question, Morien joins a tournament. A wild man emerges as the victor and is rewarded with a kiss from a black woman – but, in a twist, it is revealed that "the wild man was in fact a king and/beneath her skin the black was white in fact" (12). The text that opens the third section of the poem is a long quotation from sixteenth-century Scottish poet William Dunbar's "My Lady with the Mekle Lips" or "Of Ane Blak-Moir" (Dunbar). Although composed as a celebration of female beauty, it in fact parodies the form by describing the woman, who is black, as having thick ("mekle") lips, and likens her to a monkey, a toad, and so on. The scene that follows the excerpt from Dunbar becomes a continuation or elaboration of the poem, as the lady is shown to be a white woman appearing as (what the crowd takes to be) a black woman. Another reversal occurs when the textual logic of Dunbar's poem – disassembling a racialised woman's body through a series of insulting comparisons – is applied to her white counterpart:

> How white, is another thing. If the colour
> was the smell, then the maid was grey. Tallow,
> fish-oil and potash; saddle seat; monthly blood
> in dusty streaks along the base and up the crease. (12)

Under scrutiny, whiteness itself begins to break down into dirt and dust. At the same time, another literary ghost manifests: "If the colour/ was the smell" is not unlike William Shakespeare's: "If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun," from Sonnet 130, which portrays the characteristics of perhaps the most famous "dark lady" in the English canon. In Bernard's poem, the reversal is playful, a parodic response to another parody; identity is not just a visual game (black or white, wild man or king), but a literary and therefore manipulable one. Bernard is not undertaking the exorcism of the ghosts of fictive black women, which haunt depictions to this day, or trying to expunge them from the historical and literary record. Instead, they place them alongside their own depiction of the white woman, inviting readers to contemplate the cracks that appear as a result.

In moving on from the disguised woman, Bernard also moves away from the parodic register. Another black woman, this one unpainted, appears to Morien after the conclusion of the tournament: "she was dressed in red and yellow, sat/ silent in the crowd, mouth and lips full and pursed,/ both cheeks shining like whorls of wood" (12). Later:

> Morien spun round. The woman in the crowd
> had turned to leave. Her shoulders leaning to
> and sliding through the crowd that gaped and
> stared. Her shoulders like a proto-stradivarius
> lost to the sea. Which sea, Morien couldn't say.
> A red and yellow one, a sudden one, sudden. (13)

The woman's presence precipitates a series of doublings, as though her "silence," conversely, causes a proliferation of language to surround her. The stanza grows dense with repetitions and half-rhymes: "round," "crowd" (twice), "to" and "through." "Shoulders" is also used twice, as are "sea" and "sudden." These doublings interrupt a forward movement – language points back to itself, spinning the reader "round." As she departs, Morien notes that "a red and yellow nothing stands with/ her back towards him; red lace/ yellow silk, and no-one there" (13). This "no-one" – the black woman in red and yellow – emerges as a result of the juxtaposition of William Dunbar's parodical celebration of beauty with Bernard's parodical interpretation of it. This doubling back, which is an act of intervention from another time, produces a nothing that both is and is not there, a spectre arising from fractal and fracturing temporalities.

Fundamentally, the spectre is not a problem of knowledge. Of it, Julian Wolfreys writes that "this strange name – spectre – names nothing as such, and nothing which can be named as such, while also naming something which is neither something nor nothing; it names nothing which is neither nothing nor not nothing" (71). Or, in Derrida's own words:

> One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. (*Specters* 5)

The spectre, neither "something nor nothing," escapes definition and naming in Bernard's poem, its presence indicating what cannot (and should not) be subsumed by knowledge-making. Like Glissant's ghostly young man, it maintains its secret. This, too, is the function of the unexplainable and unexplained "red and yellow nothing," an absence that is nevertheless insistently present, and which gestures at the limitations of the story that contains it. The visual symbol for nothing is, of course, a zero or a ring, which is also reminiscent of the relationship between past and present in the bard's initial song. Again, circularity makes its return, reinforcing its thematic and formal importance, and it is explicitly linked to the spectral presence of the black woman.

After Morien's departure, he finds that he can smell opoponax – sweet myrrh – which is red and yellow in colour, and native to East Africa. Notably, a discursive and symbolic connection can be made between Africanness and nothingness. In *On the Postcolony* (2001), Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe comments on the significance of Africa to the Western imaginary:

> More than any other region, Africa thus stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of "absence," "lack," and "non-being," of identity and difference, of negativeness—in short, of nothingness [...] here is a principle of language and classificatory systems in which *to differ* from something or somebody is not simply *not to be like* (in the sense of being non-identical or being-other); it is also *not to be at all* (nonbeing). More, it is *being nothing* (nothingness). (4)

If, according to this particular classificatory system, Africa is made to signify nothingness, then, in that same system, to be African is (to borrow Mbembe's terminology) *not to be at all*. But if Africanness – and, by extension, blackness – is made ontologically problematic in the Western imaginary, it insists on being considered *hauntologically*. Hauntology takes into account the invisible, the absent, the *nothing*, which undergirds the visible, the present, the *something*. If blackness is to not be, it is integral to, and constituent of, what it is to be, which is to be white. Importantly, this racial logic is one-sided; I want to draw attention to the fact that, in Bernard's pamphlet, the black woman/nothing is not balanced against the white woman/something to form a dichotomous pair. Instead, Bernard presents the white

woman dressed as a black woman, and then that same woman without her racialised disguise. A black presence may produce the conundrum of identity and difference, of being and nonbeing, but it is not required to participate in it – hence the circularity of the discourse, which turns back on itself. Indeed, beneath the black disguise, there is no whiteness, no physical reality behind race at all. What haunts the construction of race and racial hierarchy is the realisation that whiteness, too, is a costume, beneath which nothing lurks.

After section three, and the brief visitation from the nothing and "no-one," Morien's quest begins to deviate from its course and the hunt for Agloval is discreetly decentred while the doublings multiply. For example, Morien enters a village, half of which is in winter and half in summer, where he interacts with conjoined twins; he comes across villagers sacrificing a young girl to "Something", nothing's grotesque counterpart; then he experiences a "strange and split" sleep, and has half of a dream in the present, while his father, Agloval, dreams the other half "[i]n the future" (18). This poem, from part six, is split in half on the page:

                                        I felt myself twin
to the darkness below

....

I found myself screaming   at the foot of the bed
I found myself screaming   at the foot of the bed

                                        black was the light
                                            black was the field
                                                and the rain was
                                                    falling backwards (19)

Again, linear time and, through it, descent, are undone, the "rain… falling backwards." Agloval, the father, is no longer the point of origin; he and Morien each share half of the same dream, but in different times. They are like "[s]nakes without fathers/ both sexes entwined" and "twin/ to the darkness" (18), the halved dream or poem resulting in a

lyrical subject that is entwined, twinned, and, importantly, fatherless. Agloval and Morien are related insofar as they exist in (intimate) relation to one another, but the nature of that relationship is and remains opaque.

Of filiation, Glissant writes that its work is "setting out upon the fixed linearity of time, always toward a projection, a project" (*Poetics* 47). When Morien's forward quest is thwarted, and his sense of linear time disturbed, his journey begins to stray. It takes on the characteristics of what Glissant identifies as central to his poetics of relation, the nonprojectile imaginary construct, which has neither projection nor project (35). "When we say, henceforth," he elaborates, "that this poetics of Relation interweaves and no longer projects, that it inscribes itself in a circularity, we are not referring to a circuit, a line of energy curved back onto itself," because "[t]rajectory, even bent or inflected, no longer applies" (32). If the circuit generates energy, which can be directed, circularity has no such function. Nor can the nonprojectile imaginary construct be said to move from the centre to the periphery (or, for that matter, vice versa); instead, it expands, extends and connects, opening up to everything possible.

As Morien's journey loses its original structure, it is tempting to refer to him as a "knight errant," but Morien is largely apathetic, rarely seeking to prove himself, and rarely intervening in the action. Still, he becomes *errant*, in Glissant's sense, and is trapped in an errant poem. As times increasingly come apart, so does Morien's bodily integrity and identity. After being attacked and devoured by a "beast of pre-Camelot" (which, the anonymous narrator cheekily points out, "thought Morien looked pretty hot (in the chicken wings sense of hot)"), Morien is briefly undone and remade, "his face, his sex, is dark, /gone":

> s/he has ceased to be a *thing*,
>   but a rule – a how or why,
>   a reason,
>   a what things are
>   governed by. (26)

Like Morien's body, the structure breaks and text scatters across the page. Time and place do the same. Not only are "chicken wings" referenced, but, as Morien is "being squeezed through the small intestine"

of the beast, the pink colour he sees is compared to "chi chi dango," "pepto Bismol," "[p]ink flamingos on an American lawn," "anarcho-feminist flags" and "bunga kuda" (27). Travelling through the ancient creature's digestive system, it seems, is also a journey through times and cultures. "There's also this idea in physics that we know time moves in a particular direction because of entropy – things decay and become diffuse," Bernard remarks, about their approach to writing *The Red and Yellow Nothing*. "Things are always breaking down and building back up [...] I want to let go of certain things, certain ideas, certain expectations" ("How I did it"). Here, the breakdown – decay and diffusion – is not an expression of entropy, of time's progression, but of the cycle of destruction and reconstruction, and the way in which identity is constituted through that process.

When Morien is finally expelled from the beast, he is only "half/ himself again," and is formally bisected by the line break. The introduction to section twelve, the penultimate part of the poem, announces: "It is hard to keep walking. It is hard to keep writing. It is hard to hold the two halves of the past and future apart" (29). In this line, Morien partially merges with the narrator: one is walking, one is writing, but both are tired, and both struggle to "hold [...] apart" two halves of a circle or a ring, which is also a zero or nothing. Appropriately, then, the nothing returns again as a subtle haunting. Having appeared briefly in an unexpected memory of Morien's in section nine – "When he thought back to the woman dressed in red and yellow, he was sure he had known her as a child, and she was singing in another room a song about promising a song" (23) – she comes back in the voice of the rain:

> cool and mighty like a prince it starts to rap against the air
> long since grown thin and turn by turn in choruses of rain:
>
> promise when you sing you'll sing
> a promise that you'll sing of me (29)

The rain is reminiscent of a "cool and mighty [...] prince," in an allusion to the famous rapper Kendrick Lamar and his song "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst." But the song has travelled from Kendrick Lamar to the woman/nothing, then to the rain, and then, finally, into the mouth of a now transformed (and transforming) Morien:

Morien appears skeletal and genderqueer:

promise that you
will
sing
about me (29)

In the end (which, since this is a prequel, is also the beginning) the "past and present" have come together, curving to enfold "anarcho-feminist flags," the lyrics of Kendrick Lamar, and the desiccated husk of Saint Maurice (30). While it is impossible not to be affected – "contaminated," as Bernard puts it – by the "less than romantic history" associated with blackness in the now, the poem appears to suggest that there are other ways of reading that involve disinvesting in the notion of a stable and essential identity outside of relation. Searching for one's origin – one's root – is to distract from the fact that people are infinitely changeable, vulnerable, and enigmatic, even (perhaps especially) to themselves. Glissant, writing on identity, draws a similar conclusion:

> Rather, it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it. Human behaviors are fractal in nature. If we become conscious of this and give up trying to reduce such behaviors to the obviousness of a transparency, this will, perhaps, contribute to lightening their load, as every individual begins not grasping his own motivations, taking himself apart in this manner. (*Poetics* 192-93)

In Bernard's pamphlet, too, both time and identity are acknowledged as fractal, and obscurity – of poetry, language and the self – allows for play, intervention and invention. Identity is not separate or singular, because in addition to being relational, it is spectral. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pereen conclude that (gendered and racialised) identity "also invokes a sense of spectrality in the way the constant reiterations of the norm required for its maintenance are never perfect reproductions," resulting in constant slippage (310). This is a useful way of regarding the allusions and citations in *The Red and Yellow Nothing*, where reproduction – quotations, doublings, or Morien's birth – is never

faithful, but always productive. In his search for legitimacy, Morien is caught in, part of, and helps to create a text that celebrates that slippage. Slipping through time, Morien moves in a circle, haunted by the unromantic history of which he remains unaware, but is read through and changed by. At the heart of both text and identity is the nothing that traverses them.

***

To understand the poetics of relation and hauntology together is to take seriously the notion of the black Atlantic, and the works produced within and through it, as spectral as well as relational. At the same time, it encourages one to think of the poetics of relation – born through the experience of death and spatiotemporal displacement – as being a fundamentally haunted poetics, one which expands through complex connections to what is and what is not there. In other words, if we consider being as encountering, changing and growing in relation to the other, then that relation also extends to the other that haunts us, forming the basis for the black diaspora's "dynamic rapport" with the dead (*Black Atlantic* 198). Developing a type of reading based on these theoretical frameworks or models requires a concurrent openness to change, growth and dynamism, while simultaneously illuminating aspects of poems that may otherwise be overlooked, such as black British poets' exploration of spectrality, death and futurity in relation to blackness.

What makes Jay Bernard's *The Red and Yellow Nothing* an apposite example for a reading based on my approach is its density and complexity. Although brief, the pamphlet raises a variety of questions regarding identity, belonging, nationality and time, while also imagining (without depicting) the possibility of an intervention from a different world, time or text. Its rejection of essentialism, its revelling in generic mixing and shifting registers, is not a refutation of racism's material impact on those racialised as black. On the contrary, the rejection of the root as the sole origin and cause challenges a racializing and gendering logic through which particular bodies can only be read through a set of fixed narratives.

Writing on filiation's connection to tragedy, Glissant puts forward that "illegitimacy […] threatens the community by leading towards its dissolution. Tragic action, the art of opacity and disclosure,

resolves this dissolution in the quest for legitimacy and reestablishment" (52). He adds that the rupture of legitimacy leads to a concomitant rupture of the community, which is then doomed to "[wander] the world, no longer able to lay claim to any primordial necessity" (52). But the story of Morien in *The Red and Yellow Nothing* is not a tragedy. Rather, Morien's wandering more closely resembles Glissant's description of "modern epic and modern tragedy," which "would be the initiation to totality without renouncing the particular" (55). Totality can never be wholly known; what Morien is experiencing, therefore, and readers through his character, is an initiation into an understanding of the world as expansive and expanding, and of time as an assemblage of texts and textures. Dissolution is replaced with diffraction, filiation with diversity, and transparency with an acknowledgment of opacity in encounters with the self and the other.

3. Linton Kwesi Johnson's Living and Dead Voices

> Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.
> – Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (1968)

> Listen to the voice of him who is dead
> the echoes are the voices of the far-off dead.
> – Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974)

Linton Kwesi Johnson is widely regarded as one of Britain's most influential modern poets, a status cemented by his inclusion in the Penguin Modern Classics series in 2002. Having moved to England from Jamaica in 1963, at age eleven, Johnson rapidly became aware of the impact of racism on the black population. "During the 1960s and 70s for black people, Britain was a very racially hostile place to be living in," Johnson observes. "Black people were marginalized and treated like third class citizens" (Lowndes). In *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (1987), Ron Ramdin submits that, in the era of post-war rebuilding, "British capital demanded cheap black labour, as the British working class achieved upward occupational mobility and social status," and that this replacement of black workers with white workers in low-paid jobs "would, in time, weaken working-class unity and increase the racist tendencies of white workers who formed part of the substantial middle class in post-war Britain" (239). Similarly, in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (1982), John Solomos, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones and Paul Gilroy demonstrate how "the wave of black settlement" after the war eventually met with a repressive governmental response, one example being the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, which significantly restricted the ability of Commonwealth citizens to immigrate to Britain (13). At the same time, the fascist National Front was gaining power, with more support than pushback from the police: "[D]uring that period, I would say that the National Front and other like racists were indistinguishable from

your ordinary police officer because they more or less dealt with black people in the same way," as Johnson himself explains it (Lowndes).

There was, however, pushback from Britain's black and Asian population. "The time was long gone," explains Ambalavaner Sivanandan, "when black people, with an eye to returning home, would put up with repression" (*A Different Hunger* 19-20). At this point in time, in Britain, the banner of blackness united previously scattered and disparate racialised communities, targeted by and constituted through racist politics and policies, resulting in everything from radical women's groups such as the Southall Black Sisters, to "supplementary schools" such as the George Padmore school, and the antiracist, antiimperialist and socialist magazine *Race Today*, to which Johnson contributed. As a young man, Johnson was also active in the Black Panther Movement, through which, for the first time, he was exposed to literature written by black people (Caesar 64).

Black, then, was not a designation reserved for the African diaspora, but a term of self-identification for organising a class of people with shared political goals. It is in this context – of working-class black resistance to racial and colonial oppression – that Johnson began his lyrical innovations, fusing reggae with poetry, and becoming one of the originators of dub poetry (Saroukhani 262). "'Black' in 'black poet' is a political prefix," he explains. "When I began to write poetry in the early days it had to be about politics, struggle and change" (Lowndes). For Johnson as a young writer, poetry and politics belonged to and had to be expressive of the people.

This chapter proceeds by examining Johnson's view of history, as expressed in his essay "Jamaican Rebel Music" (1976), and its affinities with hauntological conceptions of time and space. Then, drawing on Johnson's articulation of the past in relation to the present, I will read his first published work, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, which appeared in *Race Today* in 1974, and argue that the main thrust of the poem is to reconnect the dead and the living through flesh, body, and song – because, for Johnson, the living and the dead occupy the same volatile, dangerous space. I then study the way in which Johnson's use of Jamaican Creole, and his idiosyncratic spelling, creates aural and textual hauntings, resulting in a spectral interplay between the spoken and the written.

"Jamaican Rebel Music" and Fanon's Occult Zone

"Jamaican Rebel Music" is a sociological study of Jamaican music that Johnson published in 1976. It expounds on the connection between the MC and the people in Jamaica, making the point that the art of the former gives voice to the consciousness of the latter – the desperation, the suppressed and on occasion explosive violence, and the longing for liberation. "Jamaican music," Johnson writes, "embodies the historical experience of the Jamaican masses – it reflects, and in reflecting, reveals the contemporary situation of the nation" (397). But, he concludes, the process is also one of deliberate political agitation: "Consciously setting out to transform the consciousness of the sufferer, to politicize him culturally through music, song and poetry, the lyricist contributes to the continuing struggle of the oppressed" (411). While it would be overly simplistic to read the essay as Johnson's overall politico-lyrical programme, it is apparent that the central concerns explored in "Jamaican Rebel Music" recur throughout his poetry to this day. These concerns include the relationship between history and the present, specifically with regard to the colonised working-classes; the role of art in the revolution; and the role of the individual poet or revolutionary in relation to the community as a whole.

In "Jamaican Rebel Music", Johnson describes Jamaica's beginning as "violent and bloody," "brutal and traumatic," and argues that rather than merely underwriting the present, that beginning continues to *constitute* its present:

> And although it is four hundred years hence, the violence of the people's existence persists like a naked light in a house full of dynamite [...] For the wounds of history have not yet healed, but fester in the hot sun from day unto day so they multiply. So for the oppressed Jamaican, history is not a fleeting memory of the distant past, but *the unbearable weight of the present*. That as captives they came and as captives they remain is the veritable tale their history tells. (402, emphasis added)

History is inescapable because it defines the present moment, which is a society created by the theft of people, labour and lands, and the economic system established alongside and through that theft: racial capitalism. "Slavery was the name and capital accumulation the game," as Johnson succinctly puts it (402). Nor is there freedom to be found

within a system established through subjugation, even after political independence in 1962. “Though it was [the Afro-Jamaican’s] sweat, blood and tears that built Jamaica, he shares no part of it,” Johnson remarks, because when “colonialism stepped out [...] neocolonialism stepped in” (403-4). Consequently, art produced within that present – which is experienced through the past – reflects both the persistence of slavery and the expectation of a liberation that is continually delayed and frustrated.

What Johnson recounts is the experience of having been violently displaced, in time and space, through enslavement and colonialism. This is also the state described by Mark Fisher in the essay “Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” when he posits the question, “Who were the first victims of future shock if not the African slaves (and the proletariat)?” – the enslaved having been kidnapped, sold, bought, and then thrust into the naked brutality of a nascent capitalism they were coerced into building (50). As discussed in chapter one, this essay is one example of Fisher emphasising the future-oriented aspect of hauntology by deploying the concept alongside Afrofuturism. Indeed, the fundamental dislocation of the African diaspora resettled due to slavery – their spectral asynchrony – simultaneously keeps the past present *and* projects them into the future, leading to “slave uprisings and repression; riots and repression; betrayal, rebellion and repression” (404). Moreover, “the messianic apprehension” that inspires these uprisings, riots and rebellions persists in the language used to talk about them, albeit with the theological and eschatological connotations Derrida distances himself from (“Marx and Sons” 248). Resistance against the established order has an undeniably religious dimension in a place defined by “the most acute human suffering, desolation and despair,” Johnson maintains (407). Fittingly, the Jamaican usage of Biblical terms such as Israelites, Babylon, and Zion relocates them, too, to tell the story of Afro-Caribbean bondage and the world to come.

In *Dread, Poetry and Freedom: Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Unfinished Revolution* (2018), David Austin remarks that critics have tended to pay “slight attention” to the influence of Frantz Fanon on Johnson’s poetry, noting that the poet himself, on multiple occasions, has referred to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) as having had

a "big impact" on him (85).[25] Austin also observes that influence in "Jamaican Rebel Music," especially in Johnson's characterisation of the "woe and the violence associated with the history and legacy of slavery and colonialism" (86). In a conversation with Paul Gilroy in 2021, Johnson responds affirmatively to Gilroy's description of his early poetry as "Fanonian." "I didn't go to write these poems thinking, I'm going to put Fanon's ideas into poetry," Johnson says, but "at the time, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was one of the books we had studied in the Blank [sic] Panther movement, of which I was a member. I was struck by the things he had to say about violence" (Gilroy "In Conversation"). Indeed, as Ashley Dawson points out, Fanon was foundational to the Race Today Collective, of which Johnson was a part, and which "described black neighborhoods as internal colonies," signifying, "the articulation of a political analysis of the underdevelopment, oppression, and superexploitation that affected racial minorities in developed urban capitalist conditions" (83).

Bearing these things in mind – Fanon's significance to the young Johnson, and his understanding of Jamaica and black Britain as different kinds of colonies – I also want to point to the ways in which "Jamaican Rebel Music" aligns itself with Fanon's view of the artist and the artist's role in the colonial situation. In that spectral space where the strict delineations between past and present, there and here, dissolve, revolutionary action becomes imperative as a way of apprehending and claiming the future. It is in this that Johnson, like Fanon, insists on the inseparability of the revolutionary and literary modes.

Fanon's view, as explained in *The Wretched of the Earth*, is that the "native" artist must ultimately reject the glorification of a pre-colonial past in order to produce "a poetry of revolt," "descriptive and analytical," with the understanding that "that nothing can replace the reasoned, irrevocable taking up of arms on the people's side" (225). He clarifies: "The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope. But to ensure that hope and to give it form, he must take part in action and throw himself body and soul into the

[25] Johnson, in conversation with Burt Caesar, is commenting on his first published poem, "Five Nights of Bleeding" (1973), saying: "I was trying to relate the Fanonist ideas about violence in the process of de-colonisation to my particular situation here, seeing a lot of internecine warfare going on between the youths of my generation" (66).

national struggle" (231). The poet is not separate or separable from the people and the struggle; in fact, their poetry is derived from contact with the people, and should never replace, only stoke, revolutionary action:

> It is not enough to try to get back to the people in that past out of which they have already emerged; rather we must join them in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called in question. Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come; and it is there that our souls are crystallized and that our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light. (226)

In Johnson's understanding, too, there can be no return to an idealised past, only an assessment of those aspects of the past that can be perceived in the present. That insight forms the basis of a politics and a poetry that is shaped in community, "[contributing] to the continuing struggle of the oppressed" ("Jamaican Rebel Music" 411). Commenting on a song by Toots and the Maytals, Johnson asserts, "Through music, song and poetry, they give spiritual expression to their own inner beings, to their own experience. But in so doing, they are also giving spiritual expression to the collective experience of sufferation that is shared by all sufferers" (399). Even when assuming the position of the solitary, speaking subject, the artist embodies the wants and needs of the group, because "the individual experience is the experience of all" (399). The literary is revolutionary insofar as it is collective, leading Johnson to determine that:

> In making the music, the musicians themselves enter a common stream of consciousness, and what they create is an invitation to the listeners to be entered into that consciousness – which is also the consciousness of their people. The feel of the music is the feel of their common history [...]. (398)

That "common stream of consciousness" can certainly be viewed as a variation of the "zone of occult instability," the place where rebellions and uprisings can and do begin. Marxist historian C.L.R. James, who Johnson was acquainted with, and who contributed to (and lived above the offices of) the Race Today Collective, expresses himself similarly: "[P]oetry is, so to speak, the language of the tribe. Poetry comes from deep down in the social consciousness and attitudes of the population."

He adds: “The trouble of the West Indian poet is this: the poetry that he learns, the verse forms that he uses are the verse forms and poetry based upon what you may call the English tribe” (225). Jordan Musser considers James’s impact on Johnson and the Race Today Collective more broadly, convincingly arguing that James’s rejection of a revolutionary vanguard, his “neo-Marxian emphasis on bottom-up, directly democratic organization” affected Johnson’s conception of a community-centred avant-garde, with the poet platforming and facilitating the people’s aesthetic experimentation (Musser 491, 489). Moreover, Johnson very deliberately set about trying to uncover “the language of the tribe” – a type of poetry that speaks to and with the West Indian experience in Britain, inspired by the rhythm of reggae, its ability to balance past and present, part and crowd.

Another critical facet of Fanon’s exhortation to the native artist is to open up the future through their work. Action, or struggle, opens up the future; so, too, does hope, as a promise of justice to come. This sense of the future is an important and, I believe, overlooked element in Johnson’s poetry, which also operates hauntologically. A revolutionary, at times expressly Marxist promise, inhabits many of Johnson’s poems, and is echoed on the level of form through repetition – the present wavers, on the brink of change, illuminated by what has come before and what cannot but (not) arrive. In “Time Come,” for example, Johnson warns, “it soon come/ it soon come:/ is di shadow walkin behind yu/ is I stan-up rite before yu:/ look out!” (*Mi Revalueshanary Fren* 21) The threat of violence is in the air, “burstin outta mi,” but before it can discharge, the poem returns to one of the poem’s refrains: “It too late now/ I did warn yu.” A threat or promise is made, but it remains unrealised; despite or because of that unfulfillment, the utterance continues to produce apprehension and exhilaration.

A later poem, “Di Good Life,” imagines “sowshalism” as a “wise ole shephad,” variously described by people as “two hundred an add years ole,” “seventy add years ole,” “a ghost,” or “a sage” (*Mi Revalueshanary Fren* 71) Though he appears to be resting, and his flock may have strayed, it is “jus fi a time,” the narrator assures the reader. Soon, “[dem] wi come back togeddah wance agen” to “shephad di sage to a highah graun” (*Mi Revalueshanary Fren* 72). Here, socialism’s promise is an active force that creates the conditions for its survival through the people, its caretakers. They, in turn, can take it to “a highah graun,”

a better or more just place; the poem concludes with that future vision in the future tense, suspended, in time, by anaphora ("[w]hichpawt," repeated four times).

That same sense of radical hope permeates "Di Anfinish Revalueshan," in which the narrator gently scolds a downcast comrade: "Yu cyan dwell inna di paas/ [...] Now dat di sun a shine brite/ Please come out a di doldrums a di daak nite" ("Di Anfinish Revalueshan"). It was not long ago, "jus di addah day," that their people overthrew bondage; now, they "still reach far doun freedom street," despite the path being uneven. History is not over, "[di] time goin come agen," because the revolution is still unfinished, still in progress: "Wi gat nuff work fi dhu/ Far wi noh reach mount zion /yet." Fixating on past victories and current losses causes passivity, the poem implies; the future depends on action inspired by the *promise* of the future, the unseen top of Mount Zion. "Spectrality is not difficult to circumscribe, as what makes the present waver," Fredric Jameson writes (38). The present moment is, as Fanon would have it, occult and mercurial, and it is haunted by inconceivable tomorrows.

But what place does Johnson have for the dead? Christina Sharpe in *In the Wake* asks, "What does it look like, entail, and mean to attend to, care for, comfort, and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death [...]?" (38). In Johnson's poetry, it involves recognising the physical, material and spiritual affinities between the living and the dead, and the way in which both inhabit and communicate through the wavering present.

This position is epitomised in *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, published as poetry in 1974 by the Race Today Collective, but first performed as a play in 1973 in the Keskidee Centre, Islington (Musser 464). Johnson has spoken about the way in which his early writing – "late 1960s, early 1970s" – was inspired by surrealism and "the surrealistic poets and the poets of negritude like Césaire and Senghor" (Caesar 65). That inspiration is palpable *in Voices of the Living and the Dead*, which "lacks an obvious narrative," instead "[unfolding] through a call-and-response structure, as Dead makes a statement, Echo 'echoes' it, and the Living draws comparisons between recent political events [...] and those of the past" (Musser 464). Although differing significantly from Johnson's later work, perhaps most apparently in that

it is not written in the Jamaican Creole that would characterise Johnson's poetry, the performance involved music (drums, bass guitar, and flute), which Johnson would continue to make part of his form. If the later Johnson emphasises what Paul Gilroy refers to as the black diaspora's "distinctive relationship to the body" (*Black Atlantic* 75) – decisively situating that body's presence in the centre of the text through performance, music and voice – this earlier work, in its printed form, makes use of the illustrations of Errol Lloyd, a Jamaican-born artist who was active in the British-based Caribbean Arts Movement.[26] The drawings, printed in black, feature bodies separating and coming together, self-destructing and rebuilding, triumphantly joining the struggle on the side of the dead. *Voices of the Living and the Dead* opens up a textual, physical and ghostly space – on the page and, when performed, on stage – which invites its audience to recognise its solidarity with the non-present present.

"All rebel flesh is one flesh": *Voices of the Living and the Dead*

In an interview with Laurie Taylor, Johnson comments on life "consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death," saying: "I never thought I'd live to see thirty years old. In the revolutionary politics in which we were involved so many people were dying in prison, so many people assassinated. And we were prepared to sacrifice our lives to bring about change" (Sharpe 38; Taylor). As has been discussed previously, these revolutionary politics were distinctly socialist, antiracist and anticolonial in nature. "We thought we could change the world," Johnson reflects in another interview. "There was the anti-colonial struggle in Africa. The civil rights movement had been followed by Black Power. There was the anti-Vietnam war movement" (Wroe). Fanon's analysis of the role of violence in the colonies, too, was fundamental; while this form of violence partially manifests as interpersonal and physical, Fanon wrote, it is primarily systemic and psychological. As a result, the colonial world is "cut in two," its bifurcation maintained by "the policeman and the soldier," the "agents of government," who

[26] Theirs is a longstanding friendship – in the 2023 exhibition "The Wisdom Man" at Paul Stolper Gallery, a celebration of Johnson's influence in Britain and the world, Lloyd contributed a bronze bust and two paintings of Johnson (Buck).

are embodied extensions of the control exerted by the colonial order (Fanon 38-39). Consequently, in Fanon's formulation, the colonised must overturn the order through answering violence with violence. The origin of that violence, however, is the "cut," the split that cannot heal as long as institutional division persists through colonisation.

Fanon uses the term "Manichean" to refer to the dualistic logic according to which the colony operates. If the world can be said to be cut into two, then one side hosts the settler, culture, goodness and light, while the other side is the domain of the native, nature, evil and darkness (41). These dualisms originate with colonisation and are maintained through brute force; as long as the system remains, they will push and pull, each dependent on the other for meaning. Breaking that deadlock is not only cathartic but liberatory, finally allowing the native to become and create independently of the settler. Before that moment, the dualisms used to naturalise colonial domination uphold and sustain each other. The formal refusal of the cathartic moment, which generates a sense of futurity, also serves to maintain the strain between those dualisms. Rather, Johnson explores what exists beyond the cut – or, to be more precise, on the inside that the cut exposes. In a world cut in two, radical black organisations in Britain regarded themselves as part of an international movement organising against (neo)colonialism; their work involved exposing a third space, the still-open, still-bleeding wound "[festering] in the hot sun," caused by, but still separate from, an imperialist, capitalist logic ("Jamaican Rebel Music" 402).

That third space, I would contend, is also the third sense (or tense) of hauntology, from which the thing or event that is longed for, but utterly unexpected, finally returns, as if for the first time. That zone is also an alternative temporality that enables other possibilities, a logic of both/and, absent/present. *Voices of the Living and the Dead* opens in this way:

DEAD: There is a scar
ECHO: A scar . . . . a scar. . . . a scar. . . . a scar. . . .
DEAD: On the finest flower of history's
spring-time garden.
There is a wound
ECHO: A wound . . . . a wound . . . . a wound . . . . a wound
DEAD On the sacred breast of silence. (3)

The scar is the trace of a wound, damage caused in the past that has now healed. Rather than being inscribed on flesh, however, it is on the flower of "history's spring-time garden" with spring connotative of renewal and fresh beginnings. Even if history is shed of its "pastness," then, new flowers will still be marked by it; nothing new can grow without the past having been imprinted upon it.

Then the image of the scar shifts, splitting into the "wound," while the "flower" becomes a breast. Just as the "spring-time garden" cannot erase the scar, "silence" can do nothing to heal the wound; speech becomes a necessity, and it is up to the dead to begin to talk. "There is no love no more," the chorus of the dead announces, "only fire…." (3). At the bottom of the page, Lloyd's illustration is of a naked black man and black woman, whose bodies are awkwardly contorted to form a ring; they are encased in a black circle which is in turn contained inside a thin white circle. The woman's eyes are closed, her mouth hidden by her partner's foot; the man is gaping, as if in surprise. This circle returns on the very next page in an illustration of the full moon rising behind the branches of a tree, and in the nameless narrator's lines:

NARRATOR: Night comes and the moon shines brightly
Night comes and the stars are aglow.

Smoothly does the moon beam flow
from a circle of love in the sky
from a circle of blood in the sky. (5)

A correlation is established, through text and images, between the circle, the body and the moon. Unlike in Jay Bernard's *The Red and Yellow Nothing,* this circularity does not signal the presence of Glissant's nonprojectile imaginary construct (*Poetics* 35). Instead, like the illustrated couple, it simultaneously alludes to captivity and wholeness. The revolutionaries, hemmed in by a broken world, can begin to imagine wholeness, but their perspective is necessarily limited *by* that broken world.

At the same time, the dead, rid of their bodies and belonging to another order, are free to observe and speak, but lack the ability to act. The moon – raised above them both – implies that light *can* "flow

smoothly" when love and blood are brought together. To shed one's blood is a gesture of love that can transform a circle into something that spreads rather than contains illumination. The fact that it is nighttime is also meaningful, as Bartosz Wójcik argues: "[N]ight is the time dedicated to the deceased – those annihilated as a result of colonisation [...] However, nightfall – being the time for nocturnal rest [...] seems ideally suited to stealth insurrection" (10). The night belongs to the dead, and, like the dead, it incites the living into action. The narrator continues:

> (Each time men rise up and die
>   it is a triumph for the living and the dead
> never let it be said
> it is the same death
> that thoughtless tyrants die). (5)

These two deaths differ, because the former is a sacrifice made in and for love and blood; it is an example of the oppressed fighting back and, through that fight, attempting to remake the world. Here, remaking the world is to reclaim not just the future, but to change the past – to, as Sharpe puts it, "defend the dead" from a narrative of loss and ruin.

The notion of defending the dead recalls Marxist philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin's view, as expressed in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," when he insists that no real revolutionary can afford to abandon the dead: "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (255). If disregarded by the living, if deserted by them, the dead are susceptible to having their struggles overwritten by the rulers, their sacrifices rendered illegible over time; conversely, if the fight of which the dead were a part is still ongoing, then its ending is undetermined, and their defeats not yet defeats. Recognised by the living as part of that (class) struggle, the dead indicate other ways for the future to unfold. "The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption," Benjamin writes. "There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which

the past has a claim" (254).[27] In *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, the narrator coaxes: "Listen to the voice of him who is dead/ the echoes are the voices of the far-off dead" (7). Listening to the dead requires a visceral recognition of the way in which the world of the living is contiguous and contemporaneous with the world of the dead. The dead must be saved from a linear, progressive view of history – history as a tool wielded by and for the rulers – which seeks to eliminate them, and reinserted into the ceaseless fight for the future.

This revolutionary recognition is staged in the ensuing pages, moving from the chorus of the living not hearing or heeding the exclamations and shouts of the dead, to the chorus listening to, understanding and ultimately embracing their absence-and-presence. Next to a full-page illustration of a shrouded skeleton holding a hammer, an image of death as an agent of force *and* a labourer, the poem proceeds:

LIVING: Skulls cracked and bleeding
Brains more mute than stone
Blood flowing dripping
Food for the sun's hot greed

DEAD: FIRE. DEATH. SCAR. WOUND.

LIVING: Hearts all silent
the pumping stilled
but the silence is plundered
by the echoes of their cries
crawling through the caverns
of my brain.... my brain....

DEAD: DEATH. SCAR. WOUND. FIRE.

ECHO: FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!

NARRATOR: He does not hear
the voice which is near

[27] As mentioned in chapter two, Derrida's use of the messianic is indebted to Benjamin. However, Derrida also insists on the difference between his and Benjamin's use of the term, noting that, unlike Benjamin, his use of the term points away from religion and towards a broader "structure of existence" ("Marx & Sons" 250).

> the words of the dead
> near his feet
> His head has fears
> and thoughts too many
> in retrospect they rage. (11)

This is no exchange, but a series of descriptions, in the past tense, of the dead by the living. The lost "comrades" are consigned to passivity, transformed from flesh and action to "stone" and stillness (9). The sun, which is nothing like a "circle of love," feeds on them; "blood," not light, is flowing. When confronted with these descriptions, the dead, who have repeatedly been shown to be eloquent and lyrical, can only circle through variations of the same four words, which nevertheless seem to inhabit the emergency, the now, that the living unknowingly deny them. Still, there is leakage between the two choruses: the dead's brains may be "more mute than stone," but they nevertheless infect and affect the brains of the living, which are formed from the same material – the (stone) "caverns/ of my brain....my brain..." In the same way, the "silence" that appears to spread after death is loud, "plundered/ by the echoes of their cries." But the echo does not just repeat what the dead say; it is also a variation and a warning cry, bridging the two worlds by reminding both of their shared danger. The echoes of the past that we hear in the voices that are present belong neither to the past nor the present, but to the unsettled spatiotemporal, occult and hauntological zone to which all actors have access.

In this, the narrator acts as a go-between, uniting the world of the text and that of the reader (or audience). The narrator observes and relays information that the actors in the drama lack and reaches out beyond them. If the living cannot "hear/the voice which is near" – literally "near his feet" – this has consequences for the development of the text and its narrative build-up towards the revolutionary and redemptive moment; the underlying implication is that it has the same consequences for the world that readers inhabit.

Finally, when the living attack "the enemy" with "our hearts, /shotguns, blades, stones and sticks," the wall between the worlds begins to break down, and all three parties begin to speak the same language, in exultant synchrony:

DEAD: DEATH. DEATH. DEATH. DEATH.
ECHO: DEATH! DEATH! DEATH! DEATH!
DEAD: FIRE. DEATH. FIRE. DEATH.
ECHO: DEATH! DEATH! DEATH! DEATH!
LIVING: FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! (15)

Unlike in the rest of the poem, there is no empty space between the speakers of these lines; they are compressed to underline that their closeness is ideological, literal and physical. This proximity has an immediate effect: brought back in contact with the living, the dead can speak in verse again. "[D]eath must clear the way/for the first of the new-born flame," they say, to which the living respond, wonderingly: "Words of warmth make my head mad/with voice and voices echoing/making a ring of truth around the sound" (17). The "ring of truth" is, of course, a pun – the voices themselves have a "ring of truth," but "a ring of truth" also forms around what is now acknowledged to be a shared space. Through love and blood, the circle has grown to enfold everyone; they are now whole, a collective, united by the same truth. Temporal and spatial divisions collapse, and the poem, hitherto made up of overlapping choruses, becomes one song. It is from this zone that justice can be pursued. "Here I make a shadow/that waits for a new-born sun," the dead say, and the living respond: "Your sun will rise/it always does" (19). This is a "new-born" sun that is markedly different from the one defined by heat and greed. This circle, too, can be remade and turned into a symbol of hope.

Within the "ring of truth" – its contours and meaning finally comprehended – the dialogue becomes romantic and erotic. Sacrificing one's life for another is portrayed as the ultimate gesture of intimacy. "Death has brought you a bouquet of flowers/ Red is the earth wherein they grow," say the living, in the words of someone being courted, and "in the root of the pain is the root that is firm/ In the earth/ And knows the sap of life" (21). Red is the colour of blood, but also the colour of love and passion; both the "firm root" and the "sap of life" that runs through it have sexual connotations. Continuing on this theme, the dead speak:

DEAD: My moment of death was a pea split in two . . . .
It was a moment of perpetual ecstasy . . . .
I can feel the swift sweet entrance

Of the hard hurting fire
Ecstasy . . . . Death . . . . Ecstasy . . . . Death

Death is sweet my brother
Three bullets blessed my flesh.
Three piercing pollens of love. (21)

Death splits the world into two halves, but through it, a third mode of being, an inside, is exposed: to be perpetually in the moment, which is the present tense of the past ("My moment of death *was*... I *can* feel... Death *is* sweet..."). Moreover, what is being described is a kind of impregnation. The "swift sweet entrance/ Of the hard hurting fire," the ensuing ecstasy in which dying and becoming are commingled, and the identification of "bullets" with life-giving "pollens" all indicate sexual union through or with death, and that the union is fruitful. Death, then, comes to symbolise futurity – but only after contact has been made with the living, who can deliver this death/birth. The living chorus grasps and then elaborates on this logic:

LIVING: But before we gather in the crops
A harvest of the bodies of all
who are dead, we who are alive will make.
Your cold flesh will be fashioned into coffins
for our new burning flesh
and togetherness will be firmly established
All rebel flesh is one flesh. (25)

Before the "harvest of bodies" can begin, the living must start the reconstruction by undergoing a fleshly fusion with the fallen. (Aptly, the full-page illustration accompanying the text is the face of a man, half of which is skeletal and draped with a shroud, and half of which is still living.) Harking back to "Jamaican Rebel Music," then, "the individual experience is the experience of all" (399); just as the artist expresses the common consciousness of the people, the revolutionary expresses the enduring, common struggle, whenever it is fought. The poem concludes not with a final victory, but by once more turning towards and opening up the future – the living and the dead vow to meet again, one day, "in the laughter of children's eyes" (27). Until then, "more blood . . . ."

In *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, the dead are not abstract figures, but physical and material, part of the earth on which the living stand – whether seen or unseen, they carry us. Their voices must be listened to and their fight continued to save them from a narrative that will inevitably work to bury and disgrace them. As per Benjamin's warning, the dead are not safe – and to defend them is to defend a shared position. Moreover, just like the living and the dead, other seeming opposites are brought together through the medium of poetry: the stage and the page, the audience and the reader, the past and the present. As Jordan Musser indicates, "whether to witness the work live, to read it privately, or to hear it recited would seem perfectly valid modes of aisthesis," with Errol Lloyd's drawings adding to the work's "medial undecidability" (466). But it also demonstrates that the exertion of revolutionary energy (Benjamin's "weak Messianic power") through affection and action ("hearts, /shotguns, blades, stones and sticks") is what allows for insight into the state of the world(s). In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss the way in which the form and aesthetics of Johnson's poetry has gone on to convey these insights through placing the aural/oral in relation to the textual and written, resulting in works that, through complex and often playful interactions, draw attention to how the absent presences of the spectral can be activated through Glissant's "dialectics between the oral and the written" (*Poetics* 35).

Aural Hauntings and Textual Spectralities

Since *Dread Beat an' Blood* (published as a book in 1975, and as an album in 1978), Johnson's writing has been widely circulated as both sound and printed text. If, as Mark Fisher suggests, hauntology "has an intrinsically sonic dimension," there is something fundamentally hauntological about poetry that is spoken, performed, and recorded (*Ghosts* 120). As Fisher points out, the pun "hauntology/ontology" is a one that "works in *spoken* French" – but, I would add, only when referenced against the word on the page, or it remains invisible (in that it has the "*frequency* of a certain visibility" [Derrida, *Specters* 125]). The spoken French is haunted by writing, which is itself (of course) haunted by the spoken French. In this section, I want to focus on this particular

type of spectral interplay between the spoken and the written in Johnson's poetry, which is often performed over dub-reggae in front of audiences or on recordings and videos. Johnson exhibits an active and ongoing interest in the relationship between the performed and written text, inviting the latter (writing) to be haunted by sound and (through it) embodiment.

The shape that haunting assumes can be considered in relation to Édouard Glissant, who, in his *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), delineated the conditions for speech versus writing:

> The [writing] body must remain still; therefore, the hand wielding the pen (or using the typewriter) does not reflect the movement of the body, but is linked to (an appendage of) the page. The oral, on the other hand, is inseparable from the movement of the body. There the spoken is inscribed not only in the posture of the body that makes it possible [...] but also in the almost semaphoric signals through which the body implies or emphasizes what is said. (122)

Here, the writing body is not even in touch with itself: Glissant imagines a disembodied hand, a ghostly and abstract "appendage" of the page that operates independently. In contrast, the oral is entirely determined by the body: "For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse," he emphasises (122). Din cannot be construed as extraneous to communication, and the body inflects and gives shape to it; consequently, if the written attempts to shed itself of noise, then that must have implications for the body.

The poet and critic Fred Moten engages usefully with Glissant's signalling figure by also relating excess noise – din – to the movement of bodies. In *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Moten proceeds from a critique of Karl Marx's argument that the commodity cannot speak, and thus does not possess any intrinsic value. In response, Moten mobilises the image of the enslaved person, transformed into a commodity by the forces of capital, to make the point that there *is* a speaking commodity that Marx overlooks. Moten goes one step further, however, stating that this commodity does not simply speak – it *screams*. Specifically, he recalls the tortured screams of aunt Hester, an enslaved woman included in Frederick

Douglass' abolitionist memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Moten explains:

> My argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and "freedom." But I am interested, finally, in the implications of the breaking of such speech, the elevating disruptions of the verbal that take the rich content of the object's/commodity's aurality outside the confines of meaning precisely by way of this material trace. (18)

For Moten, those who have been made into objects can and do object against their domination by capital, and the material trace of this resistance manifests in disturbances to speech and coherency, as with aunt Hester's screams. The persistence of that trace in blackness generally, and black performance specifically, results in a black subject that cannot be entirely subsumed into the process of subject formation. The speaking or screaming commodity overwhelms and partially evades meaning-making, refusing to be assimilated into the logic that produced it. Carrying a material trace of both object and objection, it expresses "the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances" (26). Freedom, here, is the dissonant note, an embodied discord.

Of particular interest in regard to Johnson is Moten's accompanying critique of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's understanding that, as Moten puts it, "the value of the sign is arbitrary, conventional, differential, neither intrinsic nor iconic, not reducible to but rather only discernible in reduction of phonic substance" (26-27). In that conception, the sign is not just separable from what Glissant calls din, but dependent on its separation from din for legibility. Glissant's motionless, writing body, the disembodied hand attached to and directed by the page, is what produces the sign, the value of which lies in its distance from what is spoken and sounded; consequently, the body's so-called semaphoric signals have no value for the sign. Moten argues that, just as the speaking commodity disrupts Marx's theory of value, it disrupts de Saussure's view of the value of the sign.

> [T]he truth about the value of the commodity is tied precisely to the impossibility of its speaking, for if the commodity could speak it would have intrinsic value, it would be infused with a certain spirit, a certain value given not from the outside, and would, therefore, contradict the thesis on value—that it is not intrinsic—that Marx assigns it. The speaking commodity thus cuts Marx; but the shrieking commodity cuts Saussure, thereby cutting Marx doubly: this by way of an irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning with a phonographic, rematerializing inscription. (27)

Sound is always more than the building blocks of language; it can and does change the sign, even overrunning it. The shrieking commodity resists by insisting on its materiality, which is also the materiality of resistance, or the materiality of the enslaved. To return to Glissant, the oral is always dependent on the body's movements – and the enslaved were people whose bodies were moved, and who resisted being moved.

Read through Moten, black performance is animated by fugitivity and by "the freedom drive" (26). Irreducible and irruptive, that performance is neither singular nor transparent: instead, sounds, words and signs extend beyond their designated forms. This is din as discourse, "challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form" (*In the Break* 6). By "cutting" Marx and de Saussure, an inside is laid open alongside the outside, resulting in what is neither outside nor inside, neither object nor subject, neither noise nor speech. Moten refers to that din as a surplus lyricism; Glissant calls it the baroque, "the art of expansion," which "[exalts] quantity infinitely resumed and totality infinitely ongoing" (*Poetics* 78). In centring the plantation in the development of the baroque mode, Glissant is particularly pertinent to the Jamaican-born Johnson. "The Plantation [...]," Glissant writes, "displays most clearly the opposed forces of the oral and written at work [...] *Baroque speech, inspired by all possible speech*, was ardently created in these same extensions and loudly calls out to us from them" (*Poetics* 74-75).

To return to the relationship between hauntology and sound, Fisher expands on his conjecture, explaining: "In terms of sound, hauntology is a question of hearing what is not there [...] the voice no longer a guarantor of presence" (120). The person – the body – is not necessarily present, but nor is it necessarily absent. Reading Johnson's poetry, the body is there and not there, a ghostly feat accomplished through textual strategies that draw on a history of the body in bondage.

If, for Moten, the written sign cannot rid itself nor sufficiently repress phonic substance, that sonic saturation is central to Johnson's poetics. From 1973 onwards, Johnson started experimenting with writing in Creole, and constructing his own spelling system to suit it (Stewart 75). This form of written Creole inscribes Johnson's speaking voice into his textual practice; the rhythms of the language are sounded on the page, while also creating what Robert McGill refers to as "complex visual Joycean puns" (568). The result is, first, that the speaking body and its inflections are integrated into the sign; second, that a multiplicity (or surplus, as Moten would put it) of interpretations are opened up by that integration.

One of McGill's examples of Johnsonian punning is the poem "Mi Revalueshanary Fren." Focusing on Johnson's spelling of "revalueshanary," McGill points to how it forces "re-evaluation" ("revalue") into "revolutionary" (568). To that, I would add the word "value," which, in the context of the poem, implies that although revolutionary coalitions and alliances must face re-evaluation post-Cold War, they still have merit. However, these textual puns and connotations are only present in the poem as written down; that is, they exist in *excess* of the poem as performed over and with music. What Glissant calls "the dialectics between the oral and the written" produces a spectral interplay that expands, rather than constricts, meaning (*Poetics* 35). Din is discourse on the page, too.

Similarly, Johnson's poem "Liesense fi Kill" reveals an additional level of acerbity in the text that the performance obscures (*Selected Poems* 97). The narrator's co-worker, Kristeen, talks to them about black victims of police brutality, confronting their apparent scepticism with a list of names, telling them that that while "yu cyaan awsk" the victims themselves about what happened, "yu can awsk" the politicians responsible for it happening. For Kristeen, the dead bear witness through their absence, if attention is paid to them. Here, the title contains the "lie" that Kristeen spends the poem trying to expose and deconstruct: that the politicians, according to their own "sense," have given the police "licence" to murder black people.

In the same vein, the poem makes a subtler but just as scathing point in its spelling of proper names. Throughout the text, the names of dead and injured black people, and black people who have been

discriminated against by the justice system, are spelled in Standard English:

> yu cyaan awsk Clinton McCurbin
> bout him haxfixiashan
> an yu cyaan awsk Joy Gardner
> bout her sufficaeshan (97)

This can be compared and contrasted to the spelling of members of the white establishment, politicians and commissioners:

> yu fi awsk Maggi Tatcha
> bout di liesense fi kill
> yu can ask Jan Mayja
> bout di liesense fi kill (100)

Add to this "Jak Straw" and "Tony Blare," and the pattern is undeniable, and undeniably satirical. The only white British people in the poem whose names are written in Standard English are "Sir Paul Condon," then Head of the Metropolitan Police, and "Dame Barbara" (Mills), Director of Public Prosecutions from 1992–1998. They are singled out, held up, perhaps, as particularly culpable; moreover, the inclusion of the honorifics in both cases ("Sir" and "Dame"), in a poem about the institutionalised racism and violence directed at ordinary people by the state, is pointedly derisive.

One interpretation of Johnson's spelling in "Liesense fi Kill" is that he is privileging Standard English over Jamaican Creole, that he is elevating the names of the victims above those of the establishment politicians. But that hardly aligns with Johnson's overall ideological and political commitments and beliefs. Rather, he is endowing the black community with the ability to name and rename individuals in power, and to call out what they choose to do with that power ("lie"). Another reason for spelling the names of dead and victimised black people in Standard English is preservation and commemoration. These are the names in the newspapers, in pamphlets and on gravestones. These are the names given by families; they do not need to be renamed, but remembered. Together, they point out of the poem and into a world in which these lives have been taken, and where the dead still make ongoing and difficult demands on the living.

In the recording of “Liesense fi Kill,” released on the album “More Time” (1998), Johnson reads the lines beginning with “yu cyaan” himself. A chorus then comes in when he shifts to what “yu can” do to confront the political and social elite, joining him on “liesense fi kill.” When, towards the end of the song/poem, Johnson repeats Kristeen’s words to the narrator – “yu wan proof” – the music morphs into a slow funeral march that overlays the bass. What emerges is the sense of political and social community, first through the chorus of voices – indicative of collective action – and then through the funeral march, which unites the dead with the living in ritual. Clearly, the music takes Kristeen’s side in the debate – but so does the spelling in the poem as it is written down, dismissing, in its turn, the narrator’s dismissal of Kristeen’s analysis.

The text, then, is shaped by the rhythms and cadences of Johnson’s speech and sound, while simultaneously exploring the endless possibilities and permutations of textuality. The result, to reiterate, is a written poetics that is marked by the simultaneous absence and presence of the voice, and the thing behind it: Glissant’s seated, writing body, that is finally able to move.

***

Phanuel Antwi writes of dub poetry, the tradition Johnson helped to create and establish, that it is “a vocally resistant movement,” one that posits black life as “collective creation attentive to continuous incompletion” (65-66). As has been discussed in this chapter, the incomplete and unfinished – Johnson’s “anfinish revalueshan” – can act as an invitation to and for the future, the justice-to-come. Black life, and its “continuous incompletion,” travels with and alongside death, and, in Johnson’s works, the remembrance and restoration of the dead. While I agree with Antwi that “dub poetry instantiates a form of culture […] in which the art of poetry is not separated […] from the art of living, or the art of the living, embodied self” (69), I would add that, in Johnson’s case, it insists on situating that embodied self within a community that is also concerned with the art of dying, or the art of the dead. Significantly, in the original printing of *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, Johnson’s epigraph were lines taken from Guyanese poet Martin Carter, beginning: “Now from the mourning vanguard,/ moving,/ dear

Comrade,/I salute you" (Stewart 72). Johnson's staging of that vanguard presents mourning as an active relationship with the (living) dead other, passed on generationally through a freedom dream or drive (Derrida, *Specters* 121; Johnson, *Voices* 27).

In the elegy for his father, "Reggae fi Dada," Johnson returns to the sentiment raised about Jamaica's relationship to its past in "Jamaican Rebel Music," calling it a place where "people fraid fi waak/ fraid fi tink fraid ti taak/ where di present is haunted by di paas" (*Mi Revalueshenary Fren* 48). His response is not to exorcise that haunting past, but to consider it critically and aesthetically as the foundation of an "anfinish" but ongoing "revalueshan." The result is a type of poetry that uses the Manichean divide of the colonial order to expose the possibilities of resistance that can inundate that order. Neither the page nor the stage encompasses or contains Johnson's material; it is never fully present, complete and completely *here*. Consequently, Johnson's is an aesthetics and politics of the spectral, the neither/nor or both/and, that third, uneasy and uncertain space that is produced in and through his poetry. It is from that zone new futures – responsive to the unthinkable future-to-come – are in the process of taking shape. It is also where the dead dwell, where they speak and act, and demand to be heard, for a future that includes them.

4. "Wanted, Dead or Alive": Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*

> To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilites is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects.
> – Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> This is my story.
> Told to myself.
> I am dead and alive.
> I am wanted, dead or alive.
> – Jackie Kay, *The Lamplighter*

Since her debut *The Adoption Papers* in 1991, Scottish writer Jackie Kay has consistently examined and problematised the ostensible homogeneity of ethnic, sexual and gendered identity. The daughter of a white Scottish mother and a black Nigerian father, Kay was adopted and raised by a white Scottish family in Glasgow. Speaking to Charles Henry Rowell, she makes the connection between her background and her interest in "the borders and the borderlines that exist between one state and another and one country and another, one state of mind and other." She adds: "I write from that border country" (268). In this chapter, I examine how writing from that border country speaks to hauntological conceptions of time, the invisible/visible, and identity and community (Édouard Glissant's "[knowing] ourselves as part and crowd" [*Poetics* 35]) in Kay's play-poem *The Lamplighter* (2008). In *The Lamplighter*, the "border country" between life and death is evoked as the textual site from which interrogations of British colonial history are made possible. Finally, I will argue that this reading enables an understanding of Kay's play as enacting a Derridean *politics of memory* based on shared community with the watchful and waiting dead.

Ghostly Returns and Spectral Temporalities

A polyphonic poem and play about four enslaved women, *The Lamplighter* was developed for the BBC to commemorate two hundred years since the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. Kay readily admits that, when first approached about the project, she was unenthusiastic: "I replied that I thought enough had been written about slavery, and that I didn't want to be pigeonholed as a black writer" (vi). After more research, she "realised that the past was not past, as Faulkner had it, and that many of the inequalities and divisions in our society today were the direct result of the slave trade" (vi). With what seems to be a mix of playfulness and seriousness, she suggests that she discovered that "there was more future in the past than there was in the future" (vi). It is this counterintuitive, non-chronological relationship with time that Kay depicts and explores in *The Lamplighter*. The result is a kind of writing that makes space for spectral time, indicating that what structures our relationship to past, present and future is that other, central form of temporality, which Derrida terms the messianic.

As has been discussed in the first chapter of this study, Derridean hauntology conceives of time and ethics as fundamentally and inextricably connected. It is in grasping that time is non-linear, disturbed or out of joint, that the living discover themselves as existing in spectral relation to what (and who) is and *is not* present. To reiterate, the point is not to return to some impossible alignment – to erase these spectres – but to purse justice from the perspective or position of disjointed time. As the quest for justice can never be concluded, Derrida proposes that it inhabits a messianic time, which continuously haunts the present – an expectation of justice, a future-to-come, which cannot be extrapolated from or articulated within the current system. In *The Lamplighter* the past and the past-in-the-present are configured and animated partly to make that very point.

The Lamplighter is written for voices, specifically for BBC Radio. It consists of sixteen scenes, the last of which is entitled, simply, "Freedom". Readers/listeners follow four enslaved women – Black Harriot, Constance, Mary, and Aniwaa (later called the Lamplighter) – whose overlapping biographies are gradually revealed to be the foundational story of capitalist modernity. The women are accompanied by a fifth

figure, the only man (and white person) in the narrative, Macbean, who acts as the official record, the state's archive given voice; however, rather than establishing an antagonistic relationship between the women and Macbean, the five voices interweave, occasionally moving in parallel, occasionally interacting, but ultimately structuring a fraught and shared history.

Kay makes no attempt to hide the fractured, fragmented nature of her sources and the story. On the contrary, her construction of the play emphasises them, pairing what appears to be a straightforward narrative of enlightenment and progression – from the entrapment of Aniwaa/the Lamplighter to the abolition of slavery in Britain – with one that returns and circles back. On the level of verse, *The Lamplighter* relies primarily on repetition for its lyrical effects, often preferring it to rhyme. Unmoored in space and time, the women and Macbean are revealed to be travelling along the (black) Atlantic trade routes – between West Africa, the Caribbean, Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow – while referencing twentieth-century music hall numbers ("I Belong to Glasgow"), calypso (Lord Kitchener's "London is the Place for Me," famously performed by him upon arrival to England on the Windrush) and contemporary slang ("bling").

Throughout, then, *The Lamplighter* discourages a passive relationship to time as figured in a traditional narrative, troubling the movement from then to now, from cause to effect. Kay's play insists on making temporal fractures visible, on showing that there is future in the past, and asks readers and listeners to reflect on the ethical implications of this view of time. In her reading of *The Lamplighter*, Gioia Angeletti submits that the horrors depicted in the play are not aimed at "disturbing the passive audience-member but at pushing the reader/spectator to assume specific political and ethical stances on issues of human rights and responsibilities that must necessarily inhabit the living memory of both each individual and society as a whole" (215). I consider these "political and ethical stances" the main motivation in how Kay constructs time in relation to the transatlantic slave trade.

The Lamplighter's opening scene, "Scene 1: Interior Fort", introduces Aniwaa/the Lamplighter, a young girl trapped inside Cape Coast Castle. It is important to Aniwaa to establish a past, a *before* the fort, but time becomes complicated in the retelling:

> I am a girl. I am in the dark. I don't know how long I've been kept in the dark [...] Once upon a time, I lived in a house with a cone-shaped roof, in a big compound [...] A time now ago, I had my hair just done fresh [...] All of a sudden, some men come and take us [...] We are dragged through the forest for days and nights and days. It is a long time [....] One day, we arrive here [...] (1)

Aniwaa/The Lamplighter begins in the present tense, identifying *what* she is (a girl) before attempting to describe *where* she is. This proves to be difficult. The dark is not just a place, but also a state of being – she is kept "in the dark" regarding what is to come, and what *she* is to become. Her sense of time also proves to be uncertain, and problematic, perhaps even impossible, to communicate in more than vague gestures or clichéd phrases – "once upon a time," "a time ago now," "all of a sudden." Outside the walls of the fort, she can hear what she is told is the sea, a "crashing and thudding" noise, a "wild monster [...] coming for me." Aniwaa/the Lamplighter's confusion regarding when and where she is provides a stark contrast to the following scene, "Shipping News," in which an authoritative Macbean lays out weather patterns, dates and times, speaking of the sea only insofar as it functions as a trade route:

> MACBEAN:
> ....
> The *Dorothy* reached Barbados, June 1709.
> One hundred slaves surviving.
> Veering North West 6 to 8.
> ....
> The moon that night was in a shroud.
>
> CONSTANCE:
> The moon was in a shroud. (3)

In Macbean's world of trade and commerce, naming, counting and measuring is paramount, to the extent that it obscures or elides the death of the enslaved. Here, the precise measuring of time is presented as serving an ideological function, adapting to and developing alongside mercantilism and the emergence of industrial capitalism – a date appears whenever a slave ship docks, in the context of selling and

buying. But this type of ordering encounters resistance when Constance, another enslaved woman, enters the play. She repeats Macbean's final pronouncement, removing it from its context, and highlighting its lyrical and symbolic potential. The same words, spoken by another voice, return; this, one gathers, is no longer simply shipping news. Already, Kay indicates the way in which repetition can turn the prosaic into the poetic, diverting an ostensibly straightforward narrative.

In the fort, Aniwaa/The Lamplighter – not yet integrated into Macbean's sense of time, and not yet in contact with the other enslaved women – looks to her own body for guidance: "I am getting smaller by the day" she says, "Maybe I will start to grow backwards. Soon I might be ten, then nine." But as she grows backwards in her imagination, she also grows up: "I wonder if I will be a girl when I get out of here. A girl, twelve. Maybe a girl, thirteen" (6). When next encountered, Aniwaa's body has become someone else's property, and she is alienated from its sense of time; her name is exchanged for that of a place of business. Aniwaa, now simply the Lamplighter, can easily locate herself in relation to time and place, as she is the one who was sold "[for] eighty pounds, on December 8th 1792, / Forced then to board a vessel at Lamplighter's Hall" (7). To this, the character Black Harriot responds:

> BLACK HARRIOT:
> To board a ship and cross the water
> Board a ship and be carried over
> To be carried across the water
> And land with strangers all over,
> All over again. (7)

Through the Lamplighter's lines, the connection between a specific construction of time and the logic of the market is made explicit; she knows the date, because she knows when she was sold. Time has solidified around her, separating her from "once upon a time" and the change and growth of her body. Again, however, another narrator intervenes. Against the stark, factual lines of the Lamplighter, Black Harriot emerges not just to elaborate on the experience of slavery, but alludes to an alternative temporality that figures time as circular. While the Lamplighter begins to tell her story in chronological order, and in

prose, Black Harriot's verse relies on *coming back*, pairing "water" with "over" twice, and concluding with the statement "all over,/ all over again," as if to encourage a rereading of the stanza. Black Harriot also changes the Lamplighter's tense, allowing her to take "to board" out of the historical past ("Forced... to board") and into an eternal present ("To board a ship"). Black Harriot's lines become a small-scale version of the overall logic of the play; the lyrical mode comes to represent time as a haunting, a constant re-visitation that alters what came before and what is yet to come.

As we have seen, the spectre is both of the past and the future, what was and what may (and will) be. Even the spectre's very first appearance is, in effect, a return, a reappearance of what was thought to be lost. "A question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*," Derrida remarks, adding: "One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (*Specters* 11). I have previously argued that this is hauntingly similar to how poetry functions – by establishing a pattern that only becomes meaningful if one has an eye to the poem's past and future, to the way in which images, structures and sounds gain meaning by *coming back*. In an unintended echo or repetition of Derrida, Kay calls *The Lamplighter*'s sixth scene "The Story Coming Back" and the four women reflect on the need to speak, despite their misgivings. Mary, Constance and Black Harriot express their reluctance – "I wanted to run from that story," Mary says – and the Lamplighter continues:

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> But no matter how fast I ran from my story,
> No matter how many years,
> The story just kept coming back
> Like the sea to the shore
> Like the sea always comes back to the shore. (34)

Running from the story creates no distance from it, because the story is an active agent, which, like the spectre, first appears by coming back. Trapped and told by that story, the women nevertheless find their voice in a multiplicity of voices, but also through sharing and proliferating the lyrical mode. "Like the sea to the shore/Like the sea always comes back to the shore" pairs "shore" with "shore," again favouring

repetition above rhyme. Significantly, an image also repeats, while undergoing a subtle transformation. *The Lamplighter*'s lines recall Aniwaa/the Lamplighter's first encounter with the sea in the play: an invisible "wild monster," intent on devouring her. Now, the sea, as well as being a monster, is identified with the story of slavery, inseparable from it and inhabiting the same tense. The ocean, as in Glissant's *The Poetics of Relation*, is imagined as both a beginning and an end, a birth and a death; it becomes more than a place, a part of that paradoxical backwards/forwards temporality from which the four enslaved women speak. Here, the ocean exemplifies the doubleness of Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic: deadly trade routes permeated by utopian, lyrical and artistic sensibilities.

Throughout *The Lamplighter*, the sea is characterised as the place in which the transatlantic slave trade and, through it, modern Britain, is born. "We were sold for tobacco and rice./Sold to make the cities rise," Mary says, pointing out the connection between growing trade hubs and her invisibilised labour. Later, when the infamous slave ship the Zong appears in the play, it has been contextualised as the inevitable result of an established market logic, a continuation of Macbean's shipping news:

> MACBEAN:
> 6th September 1781, the Zong was on its
> Well-tried route from Liverpool, to
> West Africa, and on to the Caribbean.
> Ship's Captain, Luke Collingwood,
> Decided to jettison live slaves into
> The sea, so that he could claim
> Insurance on each life. (46)

In 1781, more than one hundred and thirty people were massacred on the Zong as part of an insurance scam.[28] The ensuing court case proved controversial because, according to the interpretation of the law at the time, slaves were technically cargo and could therefore not be murdered. The sea, then, is not just a mass grave, but an instrument and

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[28] The story of the Zong has been explored by British-Guyanese writers Fred D'Aguiar and David Dabydeen in the novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and "Turner" (1994) respectively, and by Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip in the book-length poem *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* (2008).

resource – a legal and economic tool. However, like forms of time, the sea is made complex through repetition and variation, through the way in which the women jointly *dream* the sea. It is simultaneously the Lamplighter's "howling, moaning Atlantic" *and* a metaphor for the story of slavery, becoming theirs in the telling (4). Arguably, the space the sea occupies in the narrative is a partial embodiment of spectrality itself: on the surface, a continuous and mutable present, and below that surface, a cemetery.

The Lamplighter concludes with the abolition of the slave trade, but does so in a characteristic backwards/forwards move. "This is not the end," Black Harriot points out at the end, as the Lamplighter finally confronts herself as a little girl again:

> ANIWAA: I am a girl. I am in the dark. I don't know how long I've been kept in the dark. High above me, there is at tiny crack of light. Last time I counted, I was eleven, nearly twelve.
>
> ....
>
> ANIWAA:
> Once upon a time, I lived in a house with a cone-shaped roof, in a big compound. My mother grew okra and pumpkin in her yard. My father shaped woods and metals. (86)

The telling of the story ends with its beginning, with Aniwaa shrinking and returning to the dark, and then to her childhood home. Petra Tournay-Theodotu maintains that Kay's repetitions are illustrative of trauma and traumatic memory – an inability to consign the past to the past – and that the play's circular structure indicate a regained wholeness (167). Similarly, Angeletti proposes that, at the end, Aniwaa "has found the thread between past and present and is thus able to recompose her fragmented identity" and speak (222). What I would argue, however, is that *The Lamplighter* is not an attempt to reconstitute what was broken; in fact, fragmentation, brokenness, is what engenders the lyrical mode in the first place.

When the reader meets Aniwaa again, at the conclusion of *The Lamplighter*, it is with the knowledge that time cannot be settled through the telling. Again, Aniwaa is on the cusp of being caught and sold; again, the story circles back. This time, however, there is a "tiny

crack of light" through which readers and listeners glimpse alternative stories – a messianic gap displaying other, brighter skies. As has been demonstrated throughout the play, repetition makes space for variation, for redemptive negotiation. This is how readers and listeners are encouraged to act – because the story is ongoing, because, as Kay reminds us, the past is not past, and the end marks the beginning. "To be just: beyond the living present in general – and beyond its simple negative reversal," Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*. "A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time" (xix). To "be just" is to be *responsive* to the "spectral moment" out of time, and it is the conflation of this moment with justice that Kay's play partially enacts.

Seeing and Being Seen: *The Lamplighter* and the Visor Effect

Kay's *The Lamplighter* is ideologically invested in visibility, in producing and disappearing objects, positionalities and identities. Despite, or perhaps because it is a play for voices, it evokes the body in its physicality and fleshliness; in that, it is reminiscent of Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, and his contention that the body is intrinsic to oral expression. Enacted on an aural and oral stage, then, *The Lamplighter* thematises the vanishings and alternative visibilities surrounding the systemic brutalisation of the enslaved.

For Kay, writing about slavery necessitates writing about that which is absent or hidden from view, not just metaphorically, but literally. "Marking the abolition," Kay notes in her introduction, "is also marking the missing faces: the people buried at sea, the deaths in the tobacco and sugar fields" (ix). There are no graves to mark these passings; the bodies were removed, and then disappeared.

Bound up with these disappearances is the spectacle of slavery, as problematised by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997). Hartman questions, amongst other things, the way in which only the most extreme examples of violence against the enslaved are *visible* as violence (21). She maintains that trying to "bring pain close" through white identification with the "scene of beating," to elicit empathy for the plight of the enslaved through those means, "exploits the spectacle of the body in pain and oddly confirms the spectral character of

suffering and the inability to witness the captive's pain" (20). Identification through spectacular violence replaces the suffering of the enslaved person with that of the spectator; it disappears the black body at the centre of the scene. According to Hartman, moreover, this type of looking is an exertion of power through which enjoyment, too, can be extracted (22). Kay removes the visual element of black suffering entirely, staging her play in the realm of voices and sounds; identification occurs through listening, and, specifically, through listening to poetry, which complicates, deepens and occasionally obscures narration through rhythm and return.

A similarly complex relationship between revelation and concealment is performed in the text itself. To be seen is to be in danger of capture and punishment – and to see is to lose one's innocence, such as when Constance laments her "big boy/ whose eyes changed the time/ he saw [her] beaten" (42). Or rather, it is to enter into a distinct political and visual regimen, in which the eye is central to discourses of power and control:

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> The life before, the life I lived,
> the life when I could breathe,
> when I could smell the smells
> and taste the tastes.
>
> ……
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
> Seems another me
> lived that blessed life, another girl-
> girl, deep in the interior country
> far away from the coast,
> a girl who had never ever seen the sea [...] (16)

The "life before," the life that was liveable, is determined and defined by scent and taste; in contrast, the Lamplighter, in the present moment, is dominated by sight, and particularly the sight of the sea. The other girl, the one who lived, is intimately identified with her former land – they are held together through rhyme, "me" and "country." But, although "sea" is brought into the same rhyming system – "me,"

"country," "sea" – the line is broken by the half-rhyme "seen," which is immediately closer to "sea" in the line and echoes it visually. The transition from "the life before" to this one, then, is not smooth; there is continuation, but also disruption, and that disruption is caused by sight.

On the other hand, being invisible is to be denied one's humanity. In "Scene 3: Interior Fort," the young Aniwaa remarks: "Sometimes strange people come down. Their skin is pink. They look through me like they can't see me" (5). Aniwaa can observe her captors, and name them as people, but she is denied the same recognition. Similarly, in "Scene 6: The Story Coming Back," the women debate the vicissitudes of visibility:

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> [...] Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But I was her slave.
> I suppose she never saw me as her neighbour.[29]
>
> BLACK HARRIOT:
> She never saw me at all!
>
> ....
>
> CONSTANCE:
> Visible. Invisible. See. Be not seen. Hear be not heard.
> To be seen and not heard.
> To be or not to be, that is the Question. (23-24)

The Lamplighter's line "I suppose she never saw me as a neighbour" is countered by Black Harriot's assertion that "She never saw me at all!", suggesting that to be seen *as a slave* is, in fact, to *not* be seen, to be nothing (or no thing) at the same time as one is (undeniably) something (or some *thing*). Constance elaborates on the existential and material consequences of their dilemma by paraphrasing Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide: to obey these orders is to participate in the obliteration of the self. To see and be seen, as indicated by the tightness and repetitiveness of the rhyme ("See. Be not seen [...] To be seen [...] To be or not to be

---

[29] This is a quote from Harriet Jacobs' autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861). Kay's use of this source will be discussed later in the chapter.

[…]"), is to be allowed entry into a social relation from which the enslaved women, by definition, are banned. Instead, who they are is replaced by what they are refashioned into. Constance interprets her new name as an instruction:

> CONSTANCE:
> ....
>
> Standing right there
> At the side of, but not seen by,
> In the house of, but not heard by,
> In the bed of, but not loved by,
> To be touched by, but not loved by,
> To be felt by, but not loved by,
> To always be, to never stop,
> To always be Constant – reliable,
> Sturdy, neger wench! (25-26)

To be unseen, to be unheard, but touched and felt, is to be *unloved*. Not only that, but Constance is cut off from her own senses, while being the object of her captor's sensual explorations. The "Question" – "To be or not to be" – is replaced by a list of demands that, ultimately, conclude that "[t]o always be" is to "always be Constant," which, according to the circular logic to which she is subjected, is to fully embody said list. "What is it for Constance to be (seen)?" is answered by: "It is to be (seen as) Constance."

In *The Lamplighter*, Kay examines the way in which "[v]isibility is a double-edged sword" (Brighenti 335). For the enslaved, social control is brutal and spectacular, a staged spectacle, such as when the character Mary describes being, "flogged then tied to the cherry tree… To be seen, to break the spirit/ Of anyone whose spirit might/ Need breaking" (23). The invisibility of the enslaved, it seems, relies on occasional and *acute* visibility, what sociologist Andrea Brighenti refers to "supravisibility, or super-visibility" (330) and Hartman terms "the dominative imposition of transparency and degrading hypervisibility of the enslaved" (36). On the one hand, there is the spectacle of terror and control – the super-or-hypervisible – and on the other, the invisibilised, systemic "quotidian routines of slavery" (Hartman 21). In "Dub Poetry

as Black Atlantic Body-Archive," Phanuel Antwi conceptualises invisibilised labour in relation to sound and silence in dub:

> Not only is the labor of colonized workers silenced in terms of being edited from history and in terms of being devalued, but the reproductive labor of colonized women is doubly silenced because of the gendered devaluation of the work of child rearing, survival, care, domestic innovation […] all of which is of course necessary to reproduce colonial and neocolonial society. Put another way, two levels or layers of labor are silenced: the "productive" labor usually associated with men (but which women too have done—including industrial and agricultural labor in the colonies) and the "reproductive" labor (typically assigned to women). (79)

It is this labour which *constructs* and maintains a colonial society. The labour is (made) invisible because it is omnipresent; it is that which shaped and continues to shape both the periphery and the centre.

In *The Lamplighter*, however, Kay allows the dead and the forcibly disappeared to step forwards as agents and spectators. Their spectral perspective renders new things visible; their speech refuses silence.

> MARY:
> I was a field hand.
> We made the fields; before us there were no fields;
> We hacked back at the frontier wilderness,
> Clinging to the edge
> Of the wild frontier,
> Slowly, painfully, pushing
> Forward
> And back. […] (19)

In Mary's vivid, somatic account, the "frontier wilderness" – and, in extension, civilisation itself – is shaped by the "hands" of these unseen, unheard, unloved captives. The strain of their labour is made palpable in the length of the lines, their brevity communicating not speed, but frustration and regression, the abruptness of the "and back" forcing the reader or listener back, too. Moreover, the overlapping perspectives and voices of the enslaved women become another type of labour, albeit a creative, literary and collective one:

> MARY:
> In Jamaica, I worked hard.

CONSTANCE:
In St Lucia, I worked hard.

BLACK HARRIOT:
In St Kitts, I worked hard.

Here, each sentence – each echo and variation – builds on the next.

Kay employs the same method in "Scene 13: British Cities," in which those cities are verbally and physically constructed by the women's work. Kay makes this explicit in the directions, writing: "*The women should speak fast in this section and overlap each other, to give a sense of the city being built, brick by brick, in words*" (62). And they do, listing Liverpool, Bristol, London, Manchester, Lancaster and Glasgow (62). Macbean is added to the choir, announcing: "There is not a brick in this city but what is cemented with the blood of a slave" and declaiming, "Fellow citizens of Bristol. Do not lay the axe at the root of your own prosperity by supporting the abolition of slavery!" (66-67). The presence of these and other enslaved people's labour saturates the city, suturing it to sugar plantations and cotton mills, and its ubiquity is, paradoxically, what renders it unseen. "Much of Britain's Atlantic pre-eminence by the mid eighteenth century was built on the backs of those enslaved African peoples," James Walvin argues in *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora* (2000). "It is easy to overlook this fact, not least because Africa and the American slave colonies were thousands of miles away from the British metropolis" (x). Like Constance, the slave trade is "[at] the side of, but not seen by" (25). When talking about poetry about black British history, Kay said that she writes to ensure "[Black Britons] don't become part of the vast disappeared, the black people throughout history who have just disappeared without trace or record of themselves, in the way that *working people* disappear" (Jaggi and Dyer 58, emphasis added). Capital, on vivid display, conceals the labour that produced it.

Kay's inquiry into the seen and the unseen, as it relates to black history in general, and the history of enslaved black women in particular, also actualises what Derrida calls the *visor effect* – the spectre's own vantage point, its ability to see without being seen. In *The Spectralities Reader*, Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pereen point to the "etymological link to visibility and vision" that is evoked by the word

spectre (xxx). Derrida elaborates on that connection in an interview with the philosopher Bernard Stiegler:

> In the series of more or less equivalent words that accurately designate haunting, specter, as distinct from ghost [revenant], speaks of the spectacle. The specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood. It resists the intuition to which it presents itself, it is not tangible. (38)

The spectre exists primarily in the realm of the visual; it is something that shows itself through not showing itself in the islands of Jamaica, St Lucia and St Kitts; in the "frontier wilderness" pushed "forward/ And back"; in the cities of Liverpool, Bristol and London. Everywhere, the spectre is simultaneously visible and invisible, tangible and intangible. Its visibility relies on the spectator being attuned to the "*frequency* of a certain visibility," to the unseen seen (*Specters* 125). Derrida contends that "the specter… regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible" because it is "a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance" ("Spectrographies" 39). Accordingly, the spectre becomes, as del Pilar Blanco and Pereen propose, "[suitable] for exploring and illuminating phenomena other than the putative return of the dead" (2) – such as, in Kay's work, the extent to which the history of enslavement is also the history of Britain as a nation.

Critically, Derrida's spectre watches us back; that is part of its power. "We feel ourselves observed, sometimes under surveillance by it before any apparition" (*Specters* 125). What unnerves us about the return of the dead is not the unexpected manifestation – in a doorway, around a corner, in a mirror – but the anticipation that precedes it. The ghost's ability to see and be seen is tied to its particular temporality, the fact that it is *about to* arrive, and does so by returning; it precedes us with its promise. Derrida makes this explicit: "The perspective has to be reversed, once again […] the specter first of all sees us […] it looks at us even before we see *it* or even before we see period" (*Specters* 125). The spectre comes before us, from the past, but is always also *before* us, of the future – it can always see us first. What Derrida describes is "[a] spectral asymmetry," that is, a visual (and therefore necessarily temporal) asymmetry:

> This spectral someone other looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority (which may be on the order of generation, of more than one generation) and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion. (*Specters* 6-7)

Derrida's term for this asymmetry is inspired by the armoured ghost of Hamlet's father, who, though covered, can nevertheless inspect others through the visor of his helmet, and issue demands from within it: "The armor lets one see nothing of the spectral body, but at the level of the head and beneath the visor, it permits the so-called father to see and to speak" (8). Of course, the spectres with which this study concerns itself do not inhabit castles (although they can be said to haunt them), wear armour, or lay claim to the role of the father in the cultural and psychological imaginary. Their injunctions appeal to a law in which they themselves are designated as property. As a metaphorical (and therefore significant and significatory) system, the king and his visor leave something to be desired. Instead, the spaces and objects associated with the black Atlantic can be effectively utilised to achieve something both similar to and different from the visor effect – the ship, the sea, the sail.

Writing about the assemblages of people and culture in the Caribbean during and after slavery, Glissant posits that "the populations then formed, despite having forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil)" (*Poetics* 7). The sail is the result of weaving and sewing, a craft or labour often associated with women. It is made by a community. It also functions as a veil, which obscures the face, or part of the face, without obscuring the gaze of the one wearing it. But the sail, while allowing for setting course and speed, is responsive to the weather, the uncontrollable, inescapable element to which it is subjected.

Christina Sharpe adopts the word *weather* to describe the persistent and pervasive, but inconsistent and mutable, nature of racism against black people, writing: "The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place" (106). As a conceptual metaphor, the weather holds power; certainly, it verbalises the prevalence of black death, with Sharpe considering the slave ships of the past and, travelling in their wake, the migrant boats

of the present (53). But the weather is omnipresent, as eternal as the tides or the wind. In appropriating Sharpe's metaphor, I want to suggest that, considered alongside the sail and veil, the weather is racism's heterogenous inheritors reacting, in their turn, to the spectre's gaze. What this altered metaphor amounts to, in this sense, is refiguring the spectre's gaze as a far more contingent thing – as a gendered, collective tool for action and futurity (steering the ship forwards), but one that depends on generating action in the observed.

For the women in *The Lamplighter*, this means that they anticipate what readers and listeners can and cannot see – to be seen by the spectre, here, is to be anticipated – and responding to it in order to gift readers and listeners with a *second* sight (because the spectre's vision always comes first). More precisely, the very foundation of their sight is the hidden, the visible-invisible "past," and, by revealing it, they produce the "something-to-be-done" in the present (Gordon, "Haunting and Futurity" 2). Partly, they do so by making other things visible *via* the narrative – but also by using the poem itself to reveal and withhold simultaneously. In "Scene 12: Shipping News," for example, the enslaved who die on the slave ships appear in the text at the same time as they leave it. The Lamplighter begins, announcing, "Nothing to see but the sea," and Macbean follows:

> MACBEAN:
> January 1st Buried one man – of dysentery.
> January 3rd – one woman – ditto.
> January 6th – one woman – of a lethargy.
> January 16th – one manboy – ditto.
>
> ……….
>
> MACBEAN:
> The moon that night was in a shroud.
>
> CONSTANCE:
> The moon was in a shroud. (60-61)

The Lamplighter's insistence that there is "[n]othing to see but the sea" confronts readers/listeners with both "nothing" *and* "the sea," conjuring the image of the sea at the very same time that she negates it.

Likewise, in Macbean's lines, bodies are produced *because* they have disappeared, included in the text (and the reader's imagination) because they have already passed on. The moon, like a corpse, is "in a shroud," tucked away in darkness; still, the line cannot but *show* the reader the moon and the shroud. (A shroud, from a different vantage point, resembles a sail or a veil.) Kay's poetry trains the reader to see absences, to perceive what is and is not there. Moreover, and through that lyrical logic, it encourages its reader to dissolve the boundaries between the imagined and real. The conclusion to "Scene 6: The Story Coming Back" occupies that space exactly:

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> I imagined I could see light on water,
> A tall house with light
> Guiding me to shore
>
> CONSTANCE:
> I imagined one day I would find my daughter,
> A small girl,
> With dark curly hair.
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
> I carried the light from the day
> You lost her.
> A bright light across the deep dark sea. (34)

What the Lamplighter "imagines" she can "see" becomes visible in the text; following from that, Constance's lost daughter, too, materialises. The imagined is also in the realm of the visual, and the shared vision, the communal gaze on the lost daughter, unites the two women with the reader. It is this imagined (but no less real) community that the second sight, acquired through having been seen by and responding to the spectre, invites one into.

From Echo to Call-and-Response

Finally, inspired by Kay's circular structure, I want to come back to the issue of repetition, this time via music and musicality. In *The Lamplighter*, speech and music are inherited, gaining strength from recurrence; they are also subjected to variations and improvisations by an ensemble that is both in and beyond the present. Variations are not, however, meant to signify individuality, but the opposite. Against the ideological forces expressed through the dominating discourse of Macbean, the women form their own assemblage, their mode of communication leaning heavily towards call-and-response. Arguably, in *The Lamplighter*, call-and-response becomes a refusal of the sort of separation and individuation necessary for being regarded as a subject in the eyes of the state – that is, the call for freedom is not synonymous with the call for rights in the eyes of the law. Instead, Kay's spectres align themselves with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's concept of *hapticality*, which is "the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you" – to remain in a state of dispossession with others who are similarly dispossessed (*Undercommons* 56).

Already in "Scene 2: Shipping News," a pattern is established: the women echo the official, archival voice of Macbean, vary it, and then produce their own poetry:

> MACBEAN:
>
> …………
>
> The weather still dirty, the captain said.
> Slow moving, with little change.
>
> BLACK HARRIOT:
> The weather filthy!

The echoes dredge the poetry from the archive, which has recorded the brutality of slavery in the dry, prosaic language of the state and its relevant insurance agencies. The voices can then move from echo to regeneration – from "[t]he weather still dirty" to Black Harriot's

explosive, humorous "[t]he weather filthy!" – and from regeneration to an entirely new form of lyricism.

A similar logic is at play in Kay's deployment of music in *The Lamplighter*. Laura Severin observes, in "Distant Resonances: Contemporary Scottish Women Poets and African-American Music" (2006), that Kay is one of many Scottish women writers who draws inspiration from African American music, partly because it "provides the example of a rich tradition of social critique" (48). She alleges that, unlike "Western cultures," which "posit an autonomous, detached artist, African-American musical traditions centre the artists within his or her temporal community, with both a right and an obligation to speak" and "subverts the values of the dominant culture through the techniques of repetition or parody" (48). While Severin is somewhat sweeping in her assessment of the music produced in and through Western oral cultures – see, for example, Jay Bernard's use of British folk ballads in chapter two – I agree that Kay uses music specifically to consider liberatory art as communally produced.

The Lamplighter's "border country" is a place in which language, identity and nationhood are themselves fundamentally unstable, and necessarily heterogenous (Rowell 268). Kay showcases that heterogeneity not only via African-American musical cultures, but also through nursery rhymes, musical hall and folk songs, reflecting how "the cultures of [Britain's black citizens] have been produced in a syncretic pattern" that rejects essentialist notions of cultural and racial identity (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 3). In doing so, Kay does not simply counter the image of the "detached" artist with someone who has "a right and an obligation to speak" (Severin 48), but, like Johnson, indicates that the artist cannot be separated from their community; when the artist speaks, they do not speak as *one*, but as many. This is accomplished through *The Lamplighter's* use of call-and-response, which produces the (blurred, co-constitutive) identities of the characters within it.

One of the many forms of music Kay uses in *The Lamplighter* is the nursery rhyme. As Tournay-Theodotou rightly notes, Kay uses the contrast between rhymes "traditionally associated with the innocence and purity of childhood" and the social realities of the women singing in rhyme to stress the "corruption" of slavery (169). However, I would argue that the content of these rhymes also accrues to expose the labour inherent in housework and child-rearing:

CONSTANCE:
I was picked from the fields to work
In the house: I learned: sewing, spinning, steaming, boiling, hot.
Wiping, cleaning, polishing, spick and span.
The Man can have you anytime he can.
Shimmy shammy. Hand on foot. Rub a dub.
Three men in a tub. Shimmy shammy. Mammy.
Mammy. Mammy. Filthy, dirty. Dirty, dirty, clean. (32)

Constance's litany of "sewing, spinning, steaming, boiling, hot" makes a lie of the distinction between the field and the house; working in the house also subjects enslaved women to degradation and violence. Social reproduction and reproductive labour sustain work on the field, and vice versa; these two forms of exploitation, intrinsically connected, produce the modern economy, and are both reliant on the brutalisation of the labourer. Consequently, the nursery rhyme's "association with the innocence and purity of childhood" is exposed as ideologically necessary to disappear housework as *work* and transform it into play.

There is also a point in looking at what Constance is referencing when she borrows from and varies the traditional rhyme:

Rub-a-dub-dub,
Three men in a tub,
And who do you think they be?
The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker,
And all of them out to sea.

In the rhyme, there is no space for women, despite the gendered aspect of child-rearing and the nursery: the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker operate in the public rather than in the private sphere. Constance inserts men – "The Man" – into the private sphere, and reveals the way in which sexual violence is fundamental to her role and place in the home, and to gendered forms of social reproduction. At the same time, she specifies the way in which her particular labour is racialised. Constance can never be a mother, a mum, but only ever a Mammy.

Notably, Constance has been deprived of her own daughter, who was taken and sold as a toddler. When she relates the loss of her

daughter, she does so entirely in the present tense, and is preceded by the Lamplighter singing another song for children:

> LAMPLIGHTER (*sings*):
> *Hush little baby, don't you cry,*
> *Mama's going to sing you a lullaby.*

Through the Lamplighter's intercession, *Mammy* becomes *Mama*. Given back her role as a mother by one of her own, Constance is finally able to share her story. The lullaby, in this iteration, becomes a way of collectively reclaiming an identity from which these women have been barred – through a tradition (and type of work) in which they have always participated.

Regarding call-and-response historically, Marta Fernández Campa explores the way in which Caribbean artists, specifically, use call-and-response patterns in their art to counter and "critically read" the "limits of the colonial and imperial archives" (5). "[P]resent in African Diaspora aesthetics across the American continent," writes Fernández Campa, "musical traditions have carried the memory of collective life from the plantation to the contemporary moment" (31). She continues:

> Kaiso, the eighteenth-century work song created by enslaved Africans, and its contemporary counterpart calypso, are based on the African griot tradition where the figure of the griot leads the work song and encourages the rest of the singers to join in a response (kalinda) that follows their call. (31)

While Fernández Campa focuses on the dialogic quality of this pattern, Barbara E. Bowen, examining musical traditions in Jean Toomer's pioneering novel *Cane* (1923), describes the "statement-variation-response sequence" at the book's core, arguing that "the importance of the call-and-response pattern is its continual affirmation of collective voice… the singers are assenting to membership in a group and affirming that their experience is shared" (13). In the directions of "Scene 4: Herself Talking," Kay uses call-and-response to illustrate that same idea: "*The same chorus of three women will accompany the telling of the Lamplighter's story, to give the impression that any single story is a multiple one*." The women then speak:

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction.
> I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself.
> On the contrary, my description falls far short of the facts. It is not my intention to horrify.
>
> BLACK HARRIOT;
> This story was written by Herself.
>
> MARY:
> This is Herself talking.
>
> CONSTANCE:
> I am. She is. You are. They. They is. They are, they are, they are. (7)

The Lamplighter directs herself to readers and listeners who are at a remove from "my experiences," "myself," "my descriptions," "my intentions." At first, Black Harriot's statement seems like a strengthening of the Lamplighter's position, but, after being picked up by Mary, the variation diffracts and disseminates "Herself," allowing it to encompass the other women. Lastly, Constance confuses the very idea of a single subject in and of the story: "She is [...] They is," she states, moving from the singular to the plural, before insisting: "They are." In the story of slavery, and of black personhood, the individual is also the group, the single story always necessarily plural. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy suggests that:

> there is a democratic, communitarian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony [call-and-response] which symbolises and anticipates [...] new, non-dominating social relationships. Lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are established between one fractured, incomplete, and unfinished racial self and others. (79)

"Herself talking" is a *collective* voice that affirms Gilroy's communitarian moment. Importantly, too, the coming together of shattered, incomplete selves is not figured as a restoration of the original self, but as an alternative form of subjectivity – "non-dominating," and offered on the basis of mutuality and active consent. *The Lamplighter* is polyphonic *and* a kind of soliloquy, expressive of the fractured and

unfinished, which, in its incompleteness, indicates the potential of that which is yet to come.

It is this communitarian moment – and not the inventiveness, strength and uniqueness of the individual – that lays the foundation for fugitivity and insurgency. As in the case of Constance's reclamation of her role as mother, telling each other's stories – telling their *one* story – is also to tell *each other*, to create one another outside the discourses of domination and submission. "Scene 11: Runaway" uses rhyme and response to explain and elaborate on the conditions of escape. Throughout, the characters repeat and vary the chorus: "Where can the runaway hide, my dear?" (54, 55) before addressing the runaway themselves: "Runaway, runaway, country or town" (58, 59). While the entire scene describes runaways – how, when and why they left, and whether or not they were captured – it is Mary's final repetition of the chorus that prompts the Lamplighter to reveal under which circumstances her own resistance was born:

> LAMPLIGHTER:
> When BigCheese told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in everything, that I was nothing but a slave whose will must be to surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt so strong.
>
> CONSTANCE:
> I said to herself.
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
> I swore to myself.
>
> MARY:
> I swore to herself.
>
> LAMPLIGHTER:
> One day I would be free. (59)

The Lamplighter's defiance spreads to the other women and the boundaries between the single and the collective story dissolve, concurrently dissolving the boundaries between the self and the other.

Several of the lines quoted in the previous scenes have their origin in Harriet Jacobs' autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave*

Girl, Written by Herself (1861). Jacobs, too, was a runaway, who fled the threat of sexual violence by her enslaver. Abolitionist in purpose, her memoir begins: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction," and continues: "My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: 'Though shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'... But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor" (3, 10). She describes the fury evoked in her by her enslaver: "When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong" (20). Jacobs' autobiography is folded into the blurred and blurring communitarian moment in Kay's play, her (also necessarily collective) story part of the multiplicity of untold, buried and drowned narratives still causing waves across the black Atlantic.

The Lamplighter's insistence on intimacy and community as the basis for insurgency can be read as a manifestation of hapticality. Hapticality, for Moten and Harney, is produced by and in the hold of the slave ship, where, "[t]hrown together touching each other we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nation, language, religion, place, home," and where "forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other" (56). Moten and Harney push this feeling forward into the present:

> Never being on the right side of the Atlantic is an unsettled feeling, the feeling of a thing that unsettles with others. It's a feeling, if you ride with it, that produces a certain distance from the settled, from those who determine themselves in space and time, who locate themselves in a determined history. To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one (55).

Unfreedom is not an unfortunate symptom of a broken system, but the intended function of the system: to produce an outside to which it can relegate the dispossessed. In Moten and Harney's formulation, the system can never be a tool for liberation, because it (re)produces enslavement, incarceration, exploitation, and subjugation. To insist on "[being] among [one's] own in dispossession, to be among the ones who

cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything" is to insist on denaturalising the structures of power that offer comfort in exchange for obedience (55). To "consent not to be one," then, is to be illegible to structures of power; it is to frustrate attempts by those structures to subsume and neutralise the communitarian impulse. *Hapticality* – "to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you" – is, I would argue, precisely what the call-and-response structure of *The Lamplighter* conveys.

At the same time, hapticality recalls Derrida's critique of what he, in *Specters of Marx*, refers to as *ontopology*, "an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of the present being [...] to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the topos of territory" (102-3). The ontopological assumption – that being and place are connected, stable, and co-constitutive – is troubled by the "unsettled feeling" of "never being on the right side" of the Atlantic, by the ideological and aesthetic refusal to abandon ship.

To Glissant's enumeration of the central aspects of a poetics of relation, then, one can add the ghost of the touch, the spectral memory of the hold.[30] In fact, Glissant implicitly does so in his figuration of the ship as propagating a new structure of being and feeling – having been born through death, through the womb/abyss, one knows oneself "as part and as crowd," after all (8-9). To remain at sea, open and receiving, is to remain open to feeling with and through others, and to feel them feeling you; it is also to remain multiple and, to borrow from Derrida, *plus d'un*, which is also the condition of the spectre. "Plus d'un [More than one/No more one]: this can mean a crowd, if not masses, the horde, or society," Derrida summarises, tellingly adding, "or else some population of ghosts with or without a people, some community with or without a leader" (*Specters* 2). The women in *The Lamplighter* are in a very real sense "a population of ghosts," leaderless and in touch with one another; they produce each other's voices and stories, their power derived specifically from the fact that they are polyvocal and monologic, several and one.

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[30] To reiterate: "the dialectics between the oral and the written, the thought of multilingualism, the balance between the present moment and duration, the questioning of literary genres, the power of the baroque, the nonprojectile imaginary construct" (*Poetics* 35).

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Kay's *The Lamplighter* is a work that undermines the sharp delineation of one state from another. It does so by exposing the ways in which modern Britain came into being, expanding its borders to encompass peoples and cultures whose forced labour were part of its construction; how those peoples and cultures continue to be a part of the state; and how the state obscures them, consigning them to an outside. It raises questions about how and what one is trained to see, suggesting that what is most visible is, counterintuitively, that which is hidden from view. Finally, the construction of the story through enslaved women who are talking and singing together posits that community must be the basis for any emancipatory project, whether political or poetic.

Considered in its entirety, *The Lamplighter* reflects the idea that the force of history in the present demands immediate action, if there is to be any hope for the future. The implications of portraying the story as a return, a coming back, is to allow, as Avery Gordon does, "that ghosts are real" because they "produce material effects" – and have left significant material traces (*Ghostly Matters* 115). Here, the material effects of the slave trade in Britain and the world are returns in the form of dispossession, repression, the exploitation of workers, and racialised vulnerability to violence and death. *The Lamplighter* represents Britain as haunted by the spectres it has produced – in Liverpool, Bristol, London, Manchester, and beyond – and asks us to respond to their collective gaze, to see and feel through them, and to be their caretakers.

5. "To document the future": Maud Sulter's Future Pasts

> In my understanding, the ghost dance is an attempt to establish the ethical relation with history as such, ancestors real or imagined. The ethical is not a problem of knowledge but a problem of relation.
> – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Ghostwriting*

> No one will document our future but us.
> – Maud Sulter, *Call and Response*

In a portrait of Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, a black woman in a black robe occupies the centre of a gilded frame. The woman does not face the viewer; her gaze is directed elsewhere, perhaps caught by something in the distance. Posing as Calliope is the artist and poet Maud Sulter. This self-portrait is one in a series of photographs depicting black women artists as the muses from Greek tradition, exhibited in 1989 under the title *Zabat*. Zabat, Sulter explains in an interview, is a word she came across in *The Encyclopedia of Women's Myths and Legends*, and which denotes "'a sacred dance performed by groups of thirteen, an occasion of power, the possible origin of the Witches' Sabbath'" (Haworth-Booth 264). Sulter, however, "wanted to take that further so [she] incorporated the notion of a black woman's rite of passage, and from the period of Egyptian eighteenth dynasty" (Haworth-Booth 264).

Zabat, the exhibition and the word, reveals some of Sulter's key preoccupations: revisiting and reinventing the repressed past of the African diaspora for the purposes of extracting from it new images, subjectivities, and possibilities. For Nisha Ramayya, Sulter "chooses past images of black women to represent, repeat, refigure, and distort, self-consciously collecting and conserving realities and unrealities of histories" (25-26). Running like a thin black line[31] throughout Sulter's work are the questions: How does one render the absent (or purposely disappeared) subject present? How does one insist on being haunted by a

[31] "The Thin Black Line" was the title of a groundbreaking 1985 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, in which curator Lubaina Himid displayed works by black and Asian British women artists, one of whom was Sulter (Himid).

spectre – black womanhood – that society repeatedly tries to banish? Unlike Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* (2008), which mines archives and documents for answers to those questions, Sulter responds with invention. In my view, the central conundrum that Sulter identifies in her art is that the effacement of black womanhood in history is an attempt at exorcism that deprives black women of their ability to orient themselves in relation to the spectral – and, as a consequence, to justice in the Derridean sense, as a relationship of generations.

This chapter begins by contextualising and discussing Sulter's struggle for a type of identity-based visibility, followed by a reading of the opening poem in her debut collection *As a Blackwoman: Poems 1982-1985* (1985). I go on to argue that Sulter's early poems attempt to conjure the black woman back into a society – and into a language – that suppresses her. In doing so, she develops an emphatic, at times declarative style that aims to make black women visible primarily to other black women. I then read *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree* (1989) and the way in which Sulter "[creates] new structures from fragments of the past" in her depiction of an Africa that exists in accordance with hauntological time, or in what we may call the temporality of justice (*Echo* 18). Finally, I argue that Sulter's poetry is engaging in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls "the ghost dance," a process by which excluded, marginalised spectres return from imagined pasts to presage undetermined futures (70).

The Spectre as a Blackwoman

Journeying through this study has been Édouard Glissant's conception of the slave ship as a "womb abyss," a generative, destructive and notably maternal force, "pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death" (*Poetics* 6). In the wake of that image is, however, the body of the black, enslaved woman, which, when actively evoked, productively troubles Glissant's metaphor. What does it mean to have one's body turned into a metaphor for the slave ship, one of the main instruments of empire, and the vehicle through which one's people passed from life to death or commodification? What real, gendered violence is occluded – and, significantly, exposed – when the black women whose physical and reproductive labour were forcibly extracted

from them are juxtaposed with this other mother? Stella Dadzie, having scoured the death records of old plantations, determines that "[pregnant] and breastfeeding women were prominent in these […] records, as were their children," specifying some of the numbers: "In Barbados during the 1730s and 1740s, at least half of newborns died before they were one week old" (82). If, against the odds, a child survived, Christina Sharpe points out that the legal doctrine "partus sequitur ventrem," transferred the legal status of the mother to that child. "The birth canal of Black women or women who birth blackness, then, is another kind of domestic Middle Passage," Sharpe remarks, reversing Glissant's metaphor (74). In Sharpe, the ship is what haunts the body of the black woman through the state's juridical framework. The same re-centring of a body that is otherwise disappeared – through death, sociopolitical pressure, or rhetoric – is an aspect of Maud Sulter's art that will be explored in this chapter.

The question of black women's absence from the historical record was being debated by black feminists throughout the black Atlantic in the 1980s, which is when Sulter herself entered into that conversation. One of those feminists was Dadzie, cited above, who recalls: "I read everything I could lay my hands on, especially history books […] [but] women of African descent with their triple burden of gender, class *and* race hardly got a look-in" (4). In "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-war History," cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggests that the 1980s marks a particular turn in Britain, from the struggle around race (under the more or less unifying banner of blackness) to the question of identity. Identity became a new focal point, gaining a political edge and inspiring new alliances and encounters, while "political struggle acquired a cultural dimension" (19). Consequently, Hall views this moment as particularly productive for artists, as "what we would now call 'the production of a new, black subject'" was being collectively negotiated within and through representation (19). Certainly, the authors of the sociological study *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (1985) capture the charge of that moment *in* the moment, writing about women's emergent and increasing impact on black popular culture:

> As more and more Black women are able to sing, write and speak out about the realities of being Black and female, rejecting the myths and stereotypes

> and reasserting those aspects of our lives which we have determined to be valid, the knowledge that Black womanhood is a positive, vibrant force is re-entering the consciousness of our community. (226)

The new stories and subjectivities being produced were not contained to Britain, but imaginatively, affectively and politically connected to the black Atlantic. In a nod to that transcultural network of communication and inspiration, Sulter called her contribution to the anthology *Let it Be Told: Black Women Writers in Britain* (1987) "Notes of a Native Daughter" – a reference to James Baldwin's essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). Sulter, who grew up in the working-class area The Gorbals in Glasgow, uses the essay to insist on her "nativeness" to Britain and her distance from it, observing that "it must never be forgotten that there has been a black presence in Britain for at least the past four hundred years [...] Yet our voices and histories are suppressed in order to maintain the lie that we are going back or will be sent back" (64). Her response to that suppression is speech, with and for a community:

> Identifying with other black people's experience brought me relief. I was brought closer to them individually, collectively, politically, and I was no longer alone. I had a responsibility to help other black people realize the importance of their own experience and challenge that internalized (self) hatred that eats away at the soul. (61)

This is the ambition at work in Sulter's debut poetry collection, *As a Blackwoman: Poems 1982-1985*.

Sulter is less known as a writer than an artist, as Susannah Thompson points out, despite being prolific in her literary output, and despite having founded the publisher Urban Fox Press with colleague and frequent collaborator Lubaina Himid (130). It is also despite Sulter herself originally identifying mostly as a writer. Writing in *Feminist Arts News* in 1988, Sulter recalls, "(I myself could only see myself as creative in a literary sense with art as a sort of secret activity)," adding: "To see those words placed in parentheses brings a slight ironic smile to my lips. Of course, to be able to see oneself at all in this society is quite an achievement" (599). The essay, titled "Call and Response," raises the issue of invisibility among and between black women, positing that, when black women see and respond to each other, they can "name [themselves] artists within our glorious traditions and continue

to contribute to the advancement of our communities" (599). The erasure, censure and exclusion faced by these artists can be said to have two effects: first, it makes it problematic, if not impossible, to see oneself (except in parentheses); second, it complicates one's relationship to the past ("traditions") and the future ("advancement"). Sulter's difficulty, then, has a hauntological resonance: What future can be imagined for a group whose past and present are hidden from the members of that group? Sulter's response is to make black women visible to one another through creative and critical intervention, while deliberately participating in the construction of Hall's new, black subject.

The poems collected in *As a Blackwoman* reflect a range of positions, desires and experiences that converge around the concept of black womanhood: what it has entailed, historically, and how that history affects the present day. Sulter's poems depict, amongst other things, black lesbian desire, working-class solidarity between white and black women, the gentrification of majority-black areas, and the connection between patriarchy and imperialism. In her review of the book, Lucinda Roy writes that the poems "command you to stand up and take sides, to accept literature as a revolutionary tool," noting that, "[if] they are often strident, sometimes simplistic [...] this is because Maud Sulter is a blackwoman writing from a war zone. And her side is losing" (551). In Sulter's poetry, black womanhood is bound up with a political and ethical stance that promotes working-class, anti-racist and feminist organising, love between and of women, and (importantly) African liberation.

There is an urgency to Sulter's poetry that affects its form and language; the stanzas are often brief, and an entire line can consist of one monosyllabic word. The authorial voice is direct, and repetition frequent, often without the attendant variation and modification used by, for example, Jackie Kay in *The Lamplighter*. The book's opening poem, "As a Blackwoman," begins with a simple statement: "As a blackwoman/ The bearing of my child/ is a political act" (10). Here, the black woman is not a metaphor for anything or anyone else, but emerges as the speaker. Additionally, although she speaks from the present ("is"), her voice reaches back into the past, underlining continuity:

> I have
> been mounted in rape

bred from like cattle
mined for my fecundity (10)

“Mounted,” “bred,” and “mined” aligns the speaker with animals and minerals, recalling Hortense Spillers’ argument that slavery transformed the black American woman into “the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world,” placing her beyond gendered differentiation and sexuality (“Interstices” 155). To be forced to embody the point of passage between human and non-human is, Spillers asserts, to become unnameable, because “having encountered what they understand as chaos, the empowered need not name further” (156). What the black woman is relegated to, then, is the “lexical gap,” “the missing word” – she is not named in or included by terms such as *woman* (implicitly not-black) or *black* (implicitly not-woman), and so on (156). It is my contention that *As a Blackwoman*, regarded as a whole, can be read as an attempt to address that specific lexical gap. Its first poem is explicit in its intention: to reinsert “black” into “mother,” focusing on a form of motherhood in which new life is often accompanied by loss. The speaker states:

I have
borne witness to the murders
of my children
by the Klan, the Front, the State (10)

In the following two stanzas, the first two lines repeat, with slight changes: “I have/ borne sons hung for rape/ for looking at a white girl,” becomes “I have/ borne daughters shot/ for being liberationists.” The repeated “I have” has a listing effect, but the initial “borne witness” becomes aligned with the act of bearing children. Moreover, the act of witnessing one’s children killed narratively *precedes* the actual children, because black motherhood, the poem implies, involves seeing through the way in which death operates in and against black life. By naming herself a *witness*, too, the speaker turns seeing into something communal; unlike an observer, a witness sees and speaks publicly, even when restitution or justice is impossible. While Churnjeet Mahn reads the poem as refusing “histories of violence to continue […] into the future” (Mahn 92-93), I would argue that it expresses collective persistence: that, despite seeing what has happened and what will happen

again, the speaker asserts her own and other women's right to choose motherhood, even when that motherhood is inflected by death.

In Sharpe's discussion of Spillers' "missing word," she argues that blackness is "anagrammatical" in that it changes the *sense* of already existing words. When used in relation to blackness or black people, words begin to signify differently (Sharpe 76). As an example, Sharpe points to the fact that "mother," when used for a *black* mother, instead can be made to mean "felon" or "birther of terror" (77). I find Sharpe's observation to be central when considering the rhetorical style of many of the poems in *As a Blackwoman*, of which the titular poem is one example. These are poems that have identified the same lexical gap as Spillers, hence Sulter's interest in what goes unseen, untold, and unreported. If "woman" is understood to signify "white woman," then Sulter responds by fusing it to "black," turning it into one word – blackwoman – instead of accepting "black" as a modifier. At the level of poetry, Sulter resists the logic named by Sharpe – the slippage of signification – through plain language, repetition, and short, often truncated lines (what Roy referred to as an occasionally "simplistic" style).

The poetical-political project, then, is to notice Spillers' missing word – the black woman, her experiences, and politics – and create a language or style that stands in opposition to revision and erasure. In "As a Blackwoman," the effect is similar to that of a manifesto, especially in its concluding lines: "As a blackwoman/ the personal is political/ holds no empty rhetoric." There is no space for "empty rhetoric" in the feminist slogan, as "empty rhetoric" is precisely the problem. A slogan, having been collectively invented and selected, and widely used to name and gather communities in struggle, is, moreover, exactly the kind of language that has proven itself durable in the face of obliteration.

Overall, Sulter's poetical approach to the spectral is to insist on its weight and presence through an almost expositional style. That is not to say that all the poems included are in the same voice – "Thirteen Stanzas," a tribute to a dead friend, is written entirely in Scots dialect, and "Azania" (to which I will return) is dense and dreamlike – but, overwhelmingly, they favour linguistic and spatial compression. In her hauntological reading of Sulter's artwork *Syrcas* (1993), Deborah Cherry writes: "The revenant poses a problem for representation: how can the disappeared re-cross the threshold of visibility and in what

forms can spectral figures become perceptible?" (30) If, as Cherry suggests, *Syrcas*' montages and collages maintain the spatiotemporal cracks and fissures characteristic of hauntings, Sulter uses poetry to pose a different, but related, question: How can the disappeared recross the threshold of legibility in a medium that renders her unnameable? The resulting poetry presents an alternative form of what I have called a spectral poetics of relation; Sulter's writing often values focus and specificity over sprawl and evolution. I would argue that, while Glissant posits an "opposition between two opacities: the irreducible opacity of the text [...] and the always evolving opacity of the author or a reader" (*Poetics* 115), Sulter highlights a third opacity, which is the anagrammatical quality of language when applied to black womanhood. That third opacity, being her subject, complicates certain experiences being rendered *as* text and presented to readers. Sulter's poetry certainly chooses errantry, embracing relation as a basis for selfhood and art, but the play between transparency and opacity in her work relies partially on other factors.

"The Walking Dead": Speaking as the Spectre

In *As a Blackwoman*, Sulter conjures back the spectre *as* a "blackwoman," exposing black womanhood in contemporary society as still emerging from the crucible of slavery, colonialism and capitalist modernity, but nevertheless insisting on life-affirming and future-oriented relationships and politics. In this dialectical push-pull between defeat and victory, and pessimism and optimism, death and life are quite literally vital. The speaker in "Trouble," for example, is portrayed as dead and dying:

> wasted at twenty
> more time than some
> life as an object had begun
>
> the Life brought forth
> a wake in the world
> that day trouble
> began. (24)

Describing herself as a corpse, an object, the speaker conflates birth – "Life brought forth" – with mourning, a wake, because that is when "trouble/ began." But like Sharpe's "wake," Sulter's also carries other connotations: she is "awake" in the world, aware, which is what causes "trouble." (I also want to note the repetition in "begun" and "began," where the latter affixes or underlines the meaning of the former rather than changing it, as another example of Sulter's expositional style.) However, this poem is read in conjunction with others – expressions of love, defiance and solidarity – because Sulter's construction of black womanhood is as an identity attuned to life and death as co-constitutive rather than opposed.

Sulter's main interest, what she calls her "responsibility" in "Notes of a Native Daughter" – is not to make black women visible to the culture at large, but to one another. "This whole notion of the disappeared, I think, is something that runs through my work," she has reflected. "I'm very interested in absence and presence in the way that particularly black women's experience and black women's contribution to culture is so often erased and marginalised" (Cherry 30). But if Sulter attempts to generate a "something-to-be-done" in her reader, then that reader is a specific one, and the spectre she is conjuring speaks with, inhabits and reflects them. Here, the issue of opacity returns, as Nisha Ramayya proposes: "[Visibility] for black women in their own spaces [...] may be invisible and unintelligible for white audiences. This form and method of visibility may be understood as obscurity" (11). In other words, what may be legible to some is illegible to others; the spectre's varied manifestations and influences are interpreted differently, depending on one's relationship to it.

Thompson, writing on Sulter's "queer form," indicates something similar when she argues that Sulter uses "words and phrases either coded or explicitly stated as queer, to the extent that they operate almost as a Black, queer and/or feminist sociolect," naming "zabat" and "blackwoman" as examples (133). As a result, the text communicates more or less, depending on the reader's familiarity with the context and community from which it emerges, and despite the expositional style. In her introduction to *Let it Be Told: Black Women Writers in Britain*, Lauretta Ngcobo maintains that the literature produced by black British women in the '80s is "not art for art's sake; its vibrancy and

immediacy are intended to forge unity and wrench a new identity" (3). She adds that, taken together, their work is reflective of a "collective subject," rather than expressive of any particular individual, and that the resulting literature may be unappealing to white-majority society (4). This is a type of contextual rather than formal opacity, then: using a language and aesthetics that constructs a collective subject in and against a world that demands transparency, particularly from the marginalised.

In *As a Blackwoman*, Sulter's specificity can be seen in, for example, the poem "Long Overdue," a challenge directed at a white woman from a staunchly anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-fascist perspective: "Since I been borne/ I aint got no sleep/ strugglin/ at the Bay of Pigs," the speaker states, going on to mention Vietnam, Belfast, and New Cross[32] (27). The theme of black motherhood is evoked, again through a list, and again as experienced through love and loss: "children stole by abortion/ farmed out to fosters/ adopted by whites." But although this poem is directed at a white woman, its audience is clearly another; it pairs visibility with identification. The speaker signals this through her use of dialect ("I been," "aint," "strugglin") and through her use of political and analytical shorthand: for another black feminist at the time, active in Sulter's political sphere, the connection between Vietnam, Belfast and New Cross, and their relationship to feminism, is obvious. This may not be the case outside of that circle.

Death returns in "Long Overdue," metaphorically, in the following lines:

> Zombies sleeping the sleep
> Of the walking dead
>
> soul stealer Sister
> whose fight is it anyway?
>
> Duppies living the lie
> Of the waking dead
> Suspended in limbo
> Cargo in transit (28)

---

[32] "New Cross" references an event in 1977, later called the Battle of Lewisham, when fascists from the National Front were confronted by thousands of protesters.

Again, the speaker actively addresses a distinct group. Both "zombies" and "duppies" have Caribbean origins: the zombie, originating in response to Haitian plantation slavery, is a soulless, animated corpse, forced to labour even in death, while the "duppy" is a ghost or spirit. In *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (2015), Sarah Juliet Lauro argues that the zombie can productively be thought of as a hauntological figure, containing within itself both return and repetition (2). While Lauro sees the spectre (and the zombie) as someone or something that is "doomed to repeat," a perspective I question in chapter one of this study, I agree with her suggestion that the zombie represents both enslavement and rebellion (to be precise, the zombie's ungovernability evokes slave revolts). That is certainly what it conveys in "Long Overdue," where the speaker and those like her are both sleeping and "waking," dead and "walking." They are between heaven and hell – "in limbo" – with the potential to claim both. While "soul sister" is a term of affection between and for black women, "soul stealer Sister" appears to reference the belief that a zombie is created when a sorcerer traps a person's soul, leaving only animate, biddable, and revolting (in both senses of the word) flesh behind. Finally, "cargo in transit" alludes to the slave ship, the point of passage between life and death, subject and object, home and elsewhere; it, too, carries the charge of oppression and resistance, of a displacement in space and time that has liberatory potential.

The spectral charge generated through the interplay between death and life finds its strongest expression in "Azania," which offers a simultaneously religious and secular vision of a suffering and liberated South Africa. On reviewing the collection as a whole, the poem stands out due to its concentration, symbolism and allegorical weight, moving from a white male Christ to a black Madonna, from the mystery of the church to the massacres of Kassinga and Soweto. "Christ of St John on the Cross soars above her. An inky/ ecclesiastic blue incense engulfs her sensabilities," gradually transforms, in the third stanza, into, "Black Madonna on the Cross soars above Soweto. A/ smokey folkloric green incense engulfs her sensabilities" (67). Ink dissolves into smoke, the ecclesiastic becomes the folkloric, and blue turns into green, the colour of growing things. At the same time, the woman described in the poem floats into the sky (blue) and then falls to the ground (green), finally replacing the image of the church with that of apartheid South Africa:

"childrens bodies. Bodies with/ fist sized wounds." In the final stanza, the speaker emerges from behind "the woman," now the black Madonna, demanding: "Where is she? Where is she? Woman with the seeing eye."

> [...] Chant Soweto. Remember Soweto remember.
> The eye that could see all, the future; past and present.
> Stilled by reality. Kassinga approaches. And yet she sees.
> Azania will be free. (68)

In "Azania," several thematic strands in *As a Blackwoman* come together: black motherhood returns, as do the dead children being witnessed by that mother. However, a connection is also made between black motherhood – insisting on new life, despite knowing it may be taken from you through violence – and the sacrifice of Mary. Literally elevated as Christ is dethroned ("Christ... soars above her" turning into "Black Madonna... soars"), the mother gains access to other knowledges. What in the first stanza is a "wordless," unwritten note pinned to the apex of the cross becomes "legible" in the third stanza, although its contents are not divulged. Instead, the woman is presented as "[ready] to leave her words of the past./ For the future." Suspended in the present tense, her words are always on the way, and can never arrive. They can, however, lead to action in the present, and a politics based on her vision: life and freedom in the face of fascism, death and repression. This is another aspect of black womanhood and its relationship to life in the wake, or life as a "zombie" and a "duppy" – resurrective and redemptive power.

In *As a Blackwoman*, Sulter's expositional style is developed and deployed in order to make black women visible to one another, contributing to and creating a tradition that allows them to name themselves. Sulter is also consciously constructing and staging a type of black womanhood that centres class, lesbianism and women, turning the page into a "space or canvas, on which to conduct an exploration into the inner landscapes of black subjectivity," to borrow from Stuart Hall on black self-portraiture in Britain in the 1980s ("Black Diaspora" 20). Her method is bent on making the absent and objectified subject present, seen and felt, in a language that continues to phantomise that subject, through speaking directly to her. Another aspect of her work,

however, is her relationship to tradition. For Sulter, to revisit and "represent, repeat, refigure" the past is to reimagine a multiplicity of futures (Ramayya 25). While this is evident in her visual art, it is less discussed with regard to her poetry, and more often conflated with what is assumed to be a naïve or idealistic view of Africa and African heritage. It is my belief that Sulter's Africa is intended to have subtler and more spectral effects. The black woman haunts the present, but she returns from pasts and futures that are yet to be determined.

Imagined Pasts and Projected Futures

Roy's review of *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree* is critical of Sulter's treatment of Africa. Devoid of complexity and diversity, the continent becomes "the Africa non-Africans have been trained to see: a romanticized continent of purity and renewal" (553-54). Similarly, Jim Mabon regards Sulter's Africa as "an unproblematic, inclusive motherland," a source of strength, identity and unity that is often conflated with blackness itself (152). My point, however, is that rather than being an attempt at an actual depiction of Africa, an uncomplicated source or origin situated in the past, Sulter's is an imagined Africa that arises from and can be located in the diaspora. Sulter employs this communal, imagined and diasporic Africa not to emphasise roots or rootedness, but connection and relation. This Africa endures despite, or even because of, racial oppression, and is maintained by its dispersed people; its purpose is to orient them backwards and forwards in time, in a pursuit of justice that (like mourning) is interminable.

Writing about the African diasporic subject in Europe, Sulter asks: "How do we exist in a world where we are invisibilized as women of African descent? Where our cultures are seen as having no 'classical' root (although Greek scholars sat at the feet of Egyptians…)?" ("Call and Response" 600) In the Global North, the African presence is obscured, its influence on history and culture denied. According to Sulter, the consequences are not just political, but existential; the erasure of one's history has a profound impact on one's present. On a similar note, regarding art by black women, she posits:

> Works by our Black foresisters do not seem to be hidden in the vaults of our national museums. Where their creativity does exist, it is mouldering away as the ethnographic exhibit […] In acknowledging this absence we allow ourselves the opportunity to fill these gaps with our own scholarship, artworks, exploration. An absence can only be bridged by an active present. How we live now affects what those who shall follow us into the vaults of our national collections will discover in the future. (*Echo* 13)

Sulter's response to the question she poses, then – "How do we exist?" – is to take imaginative, artistic charge, to "[create] new structures from fragments of the past which then inform the present" (18). These statements by Sulter suggest a far more active and creative relationship to questions of the past, and specifically Africa in and as the past, than Roy and Mabon conclude. Moreover, her statements indicate that the problem of the past is, in essence, a problem of the future. As mentioned previously, it is also a problem of justice, in the Derridean sense. For Derrida, the spectral presence is that which connects us to generations past, present and future; more than that, it demands that we take responsibility for them. "[Without] this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question 'where?' 'where tomorrow?' 'whither?'" (*Specters* xviii). Justice can be considered a temporal concern, for both Derrida and Sulter, because there can be no claim to the future ("where tomorrow?" or "how does one exist?") if there is no sense of indebtedness to, or recognition of, the past.

Crucially, Sulter is less interested in recovering the past than in (co-)creating it, alongside other black people. First, because the official record of the past is also created, albeit through discourses of power that suppress, invisibilise and marginalise; second, because the past, freed from those discourses, is the herald of the future. In an essay on women artists, Sulter writes about "challenging the patriarchal nature of linear constructions of time throughout history" through the "creation of other rhythms," ones which do not necessarily consider the past to be fixed in place (and time) (*Echo* 8). In her visionary, playful and political conception of the past, Sulter is engaging with what Stuart Hall refers to as "not the rediscovery but the *production* of identity" – identity-production based on the "*retelling* of the past" ("Cultural Identity" 259). To Hall, retelling the past is a way of resisting colonisation and

its fragmentation of one's community and sense of self; it also understands identity as necessarily dynamic, unstable, and subject to change ("Cultural Identity" 260). To return to Glissant, that sense of the past exhibits an understanding of identity as becoming in and through relation, rather than through rediscovery or reconnection with one's root. It is this understanding of identity that undergirds Sulter's depiction of Africa in *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree* (1989).

Furthermore, Sulter's Africa can be regarded as an example of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her comment on *Specters of Marx*, refers to as "the ghost dance" (Spivak 70). Spivak, deeply sceptical of Derrida's reading of Marx, borrows the idea from James Mooney's 1896 description of the ghost dance as practiced by the Sioux. For Spivak, the ghost dance becomes "an attempt to establish the ethical relation with history as such, ancestors real and imagined," meaning that it is not "a past that was necessarily once present that is sought" (70). Instead, the silenced and invisibilised can draw on *imagined* histories for the purposes of conjuring futures that appear without guarantee, as possibility, as "the future anterior" (71). It is this relationship to the past-as-future that Sulter, too, exhibits when she states: "No one will document our future but us," addressing other black women ("Call and Response" 601). Documenting is commonly done *after* an event, but in Sulter's unfixed temporalities, those who live now – who write, paint, dance and struggle – are the spectral secretaries of futures created through alternative pasts.

The title of *Zabat: Poetics of a Family Tree* attaches Sulter's "black woman's rite of passage [...] from the period of Egyptian eighteenth dynasty" (Haworth Booth 264) to the notion of the family tree, implying that the search for traceable origin that the family tree symbolises may be subverted through invention. That implication is supported by the first poem, "Cadences," which becomes an introduction through which the other poems return and refract. Sulter writes of fingers "[raking] the debris/ of the past," resulting in:

> Mirrored
> visions
> here
> fragments
> regain

wholeness. (7)

These brief, fragmentary lines designate the poem ("here") as the space wherein broken pieces come together, creating one or several reflective surfaces ("mirrored visions"). That "wholeness," however, is not found in "the past," but in other people: "Unknown words/ dance… across/ the space/ and time/ between us.// We become one," the narrator states, describing a rite in which she and one or several others mix blood. Then, in the final stanza:

Unity transfixes us
and we hang
suspended
in this European
time and space
but travel
centuries
to our
birthright. (9)

"Wholeness" and "unity" do not follow automatically from an identity or bloodline; instead, an action has to be initiated, blood shared and blended in improvised rites. Connection, then, is established through deliberate choice. Moreover, in the final stanza, the "here" is revealed to be not just the space of the poem, but Europe. However, because "unity" has been achieved, the poem's *we* now occupy a different and parallel "space/ and time" to that of Europe – the "space/ and time" that arises "between" them. From that shared suspension, they can access other times, and claim what is owed them. That "birthright" is never specified, nor, significantly, is it spatiotemporally determined – do they travel centuries into the past or into the future? – but it is held in common.

The poem "Rites of Passage" develops the idea of a non-Western, non-European understanding of time, which also has the potential to act as a home or haven. The "rite of passage" in the title is implied, not depicted, as a "young woman" is introduced, "cowries" scattered at her feet (10). In the third stanza, the "young woman" is associated with menstrual blood, illustrating what Sulter reflected on as "time […] translated through the potential for female rhythms which reflect

temporal experience," non-linear and non-chronological in nature (*Echo* 12):

> Time cannot be hampered
> by the distorted
> cycle of the West
> time cannot be harnessed. (10)

Time, as translated through the young woman, moves in cycles and flows. That young woman is also implied to be of African descent, her hair braided and "adorned/ with shells," and she celebrates herself, declaring: "Come see/ my hair," and "Come hear/ my lips sing." In the very next stanza, however, she undergoes a difficult transformation:

> A young woman
> I wait
> sometimes
> angry
>
> [...]
> my own
> initiation
> rite awaits. (11)

The first "young woman" and the second could very well be the same person, in different times; the "waiting" young woman, however, lacks the community of the women in "Cadences," and so "unity" is continually deferred:

> Here in the land of no sun I await the break of day
>
> Out there somewhere you wait for me
> in another country
> place and time (12)

Variations on "wait" recur in four consecutive stanzas, signalling that, like the speaker in "Cadences," the "I" in "Rite of Passage" exists in suspension. Unlike her, this speaker is isolated, and unable to act on anything but herself; she attempts to rid herself of her racialised attributes, cutting off her hair, and watching passively as her skin "pales," her body

“rebels,” and her “spirit/ soars away” (12). Eventually, growing “weak,” claimed by entropy, she is harnessed, hampered and alienated. Still, the speaker attempts to chase after her vanishing spirit, only to return home “[feeling] nothing” between her thighs except “an empty/ vacant pulse”:

> it mocks
> by chanting
> Ka
> Ka
> Ka
>
> I know not what it means (14)

The *ka* is a concept in ancient Egyptian religion, one of the constituent parts of the self that disperses after death. Signifying vitality, it also, according to Egyptologist Jan Assmann, restores ruptured social bonds and status to the dead, symbolising “connectivity that crosses both the boundary between generations and the threshold of death” (44). Sulter’s retelling (and retooling) of the term also, I would argue, has that same symbolic power. Without social bonds and community, the individual’s “spirit” dissipates, and the word Ka becomes incomprehensible.

That speaker’s stated incomprehension stands in contrast with Ka as used in the poem “Historical Objects,” in which the “ethnographic exhibit” is made to reveal its contents.

> Cave drawings 1715k years old
> humanities oldest representation
> of our form Blackwoman her soul
> sits uneasy in a Viennese prison.
> Egyptian mummified bodies stolen
> rot uneasily in European hells
> of culture. So sets the scene
> of us Blackwomen in Europe. (68)

Again, the scene is Europe, and a parallel is drawn between how European society treats representations of black women and the way in which living black women are objectified. Displayed as “historical

objects," and situated in the linear, European past – equated with "prisons" and "hell" – these are "uneasy," unsettled souls and bodies. Europe and Europe's treatment of black women also, as in "Rite of Passage," affect black women's sense of self, particularly the self in relation to the future. The narrator addresses someone – possibly the young woman speaker in "Rite of Passage," who "paled" and cut off her hair – saying, "Freedom freedom/ has an empty call when I see you/ still chained to their supremacist/ belief" (68).

> […] They cannot
> be allowed any longer to rewrite
> our experience; call it marxist
> or feminist, history or herstory
> no-longer no more. Ka is rising.
> Ka is rising. Listen. Listen
> you can her hear call. For Ka
> is rising. Ka is rising. Hear
> come hear her call. (68)

Here, Ka is a female force or imagined ancestral spirit that arises to oppose Europe – but Ka is understood affectively and politically, not archaeologically. Ka is not a "historical object," but reclaimed in (and shaped in relation to) a living present to conjure the future. To listen to Ka, to heed her call, is to acknowledge both continuity and rupture, in order to establish a "freedom" that can reach across generations:

> Whatever fragment you find
> preserve
> recognise
> your self
>   heritage
>   responsibility
>   worth
>
> ....
>
> The Spirit of Ka. (70)

What Sulter summons through her Ka, and what she presents as acting in accordance with Ka, resonates with Derrida in understanding

politics and ethics as dependant on a sense of "heritage, responsibility, worth" or, as Derrida puts it, "a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" (*Specters* xviii). Moreover, as Wendy Brown points out, Derridean justice "makes futurity" by establishing the present's relationship to the future, its living-on in a time to come (148). The Spirit of Ka, then, is Sulter's way of crafting a relationship between generations for a group of people – black women in the diaspora – who have been prevented from seeing one another. This, I would argue, is the family tree Sulter is attempting to construct with and for black female readers.

Africa in *Zabat* is more than "a romanticized continent of purity and renewal" (Roy 553-54), because, often, the Africa being depicted is deployed like Ka – as a political concept, reworked in and by the diaspora, that denaturalises a linear conception of time. "A Poem of Love," for example, aligns Sulter's Africa with Ka through the "call": "Africa beckons with her bittersweet call" (21). Although trapped in Britain – referred to as "the belly of [a] retrograde beast," the "consumer" of culture and the "communal soul" – the *we* in "A Poem of Love" can imagine differently, together. "Do not allow our oppressor, of whatever hue, tell us that we in our blackness/ are not African children. Are not the warriors of time" (21). Again, identity is based on identification and political affiliation, not on essentialism – the "oppressor" is not necessarily white. Being an "African child" is to recognise oneself as a "[warrior] of time," as engaged in the (re)construction of fragmented, generational relationships, over and across the diaspora. "Ours is the future we dared not/ hope to imagine/ least of all create," the speaker tells her lover, then urges her (and unnamed others) to raise their voices, "Echoing from Europe to the Americas and back to the/ continent of Africa herself":

> The seed of our future is planted within us. Where we go it
> follows. Feeding
> on warm african soil, a warm and inviting reservoir in our
> bellies. Carried into
> diaspora. The entire world can be our rightful home. (22)

"Africa" is not home, but a way to orient oneself in the world; to claim one's connection to *this* Africa is to understand that "home" is a time

rather than a place, a future that is unknowable, but on its way. In contrast, the glimpses *Zabat* offers of Africa as an actual place are far less abstract.

In "North," the speaker describes a journey to the "continent," commenting: "[around] us French/ Arabic/ colonial/ imperial legacies," noting that the call to prayer "crackles technologically/ over a double headed/ loudspeaker" (30). This is not an Africa untouched by economic devastation or technological innovation, nor is the speaker's visit an unproblematic return to her ancestral homeland: "Awake before dawn," she says, "feeling closer to God/ but not quite home" (31). The tone is melancholic, lacking the triumphant bravado engendered by the vision of the future in "A Poem of Love." In "South," too, South Africa becomes visible through letters and postcards from a friend or lover: the letters include "fashion plates/ of blackwomen" in expensive clothes, the postcards "bodies/ of our Sowetan dead" (37). In this poem, South Africa is as real as the London to which the letters and postcards are sent, and as structured by interlocking struggles of class and race. The poem "West" attempts to harbour both Africas, the real and the abstract, but does so by placing the latter either within a conversation or in italics:

> Generations
>
> Coming home was not
> a visit to my
> fathers compound
> but some hours spent
> in dialogue with you.
>
> Africa waits patiently you said (49)

Home and identity are not found through the father and the line of descent, nor through filiation's settled relationship to the land. Here, it is located in time and togetherness, in "some hours" in conversation with a loved one. The poem concludes by restating its commitment to this home, which is a home without guarantees, and always under construction: "*This is the lost time/ and future time; Africa*" (51). Sulter's Africa, then, is the modality through which the history and politics of the black diaspora can be felt and fought for.

***

To be a "warrior of time" is, in Sulter's writing, synonymous with a liberatory and radical black politics; for her, as for Derrida, the ethical is a question of time. That is one reason behind her "looping temporalities [...] veering between and across 'our' time, the past and the future" (Thompson 155), and their apparent and intense association with Africa and womanhood. Her work centres on, first, making black women visible to one another; second, establishing a continuity between black women, reaching back into the past and stretching into an unbounded future. In that work, fiction and reality are not opposed, but necessarily complementary in "'the production of a new, black subject'" (Hall, "Black Diaspora" 19). Rejecting that continuity, or refusing to engage with it, is self-destructive, because "Sulter suggests an existential equivalence between predecessors and successors, and a spatial and temporal looping of historical and contemporary creative and cultural production" (Ramayya 9). One must, as a black woman, recognise oneself as a successor, because it entails recognising oneself as someone else's predecessor; that is what it means to act in relation to the dead and the not-yet-living, in the spirit of heritage, responsibility and worth.

The past, like the personal, is political; being haunted by a past "that was [not] necessarily present," per Spivak (70) – a non-present present – fuses collective creativity and spectrality, allowing for new and unpredictable ghosts. Both the Spirit of Ka and Africa, in this context, are powerful poetical conceits that are designed to have political effects, on the page and off it, inviting readers to join in the creation of unknown futures and unreal pasts. When Sulter writes: "I dream of Blackwomen in the Scottish Court/ Their dresses and jewels,/ They raise their eyebrows at the ridiculous cold" (*Zabat* 61), she makes impossible spectres possible, and invites us to invite them in.

6. "What Remains": Jay Bernard and the Poetry of the Sepulchre

> A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise.
> – Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (1995)

> No-one will tell me   what happened to my body
> – Jay Bernard, "Duppy" in *Surge* (2019)

On 18 January 1981, a fire broke out at the joint birthday party of London teenagers Yvonne Ruddock and Angela Jackson, at the home of Ruddock's family in 439 New Cross Road. Thirteen young people and children died. One survivor, Anthony Berbeck, died by suicide two years later, and is often referred to as the fire's fourteenth victim. Due to the police's neglectful handling of the investigation, the cause behind the fire has never been conclusively established, though many suspect it to have been a racially motivated hate crime (Andrews). The black community was quick to rally around the victims and their families, labelling the disaster the New Cross Massacre and forming a committee that would conduct its own interviews in the form of a community-led enquiry. In early March of 1981, the New Cross Massacre Action Committee organised a Black People's Day of Action, during which twenty thousand protesters marched through the streets of London. The response from the British state, headed at the time by Conservative party leader Margaret Thatcher, would be severe, resulting in more repressive policing against the black community. This, in turn, brought the tensions between black Britons and the police to a pitch, sparking the Brixton uprising in April (Mohdin). It is this history that Jay Bernard revisits in *Surge* (2019), inspired by their time as writer in residence at the George Padmore Institute in London. Employing its archive, Bernard juxtaposes material about the New Cross fire with the "eerily similar" events leading to the devastating fire in Grenfell Tower in 2017 (*Surge* xi).

In this chapter, I read *Surge* through Achille Mbembe's "The Power of the Archive and its Limits" (2002), arguing that Jay Bernard's project tests those limits by exhuming the archive's buried political potential. They interrogate the archive's relationship to death, using poetry and the poetic voice to infuse death with life, possibility, and the ecstasies and terrors of black (queer) embodiment. Through *Surge*, the archive is shown to share the same spectral time and space as the victims of racial violence whose traces inhabit it. Like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Bernard views history "not [as] a fleeting memory of the distant past," but as "the unbearable weight of the present," while the archive itself becomes what Derrida calls "a question of the future" ("Rebel Music" 402; *Archive Fever* 36). Figuring history as the present turns the narration *of* history into participation *in* history, unsettling the past and revealing it (and the archive that records it) to be a place of ongoing contestation.

"No remains": Writing with the Archive in Jay Bernard's *Surge*

In "The Power of the Archive and its Limits," Mbembe analyses the construction and force of the archive, pointing out that "the archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of *a specific power and authority*, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded" (20; emphasis added). Amongst other things, he concludes that the archive has a status that is both material and imaginary. Its material status concerns the archive as tactile, as proof, while its imaginary status serves to create the illusion of continuity and collective ownership over its contents. The former is real, a consequence of collecting concrete matter in one space or place. The latter, on the other hand, is the archive's role as an *instituting imaginary* ("Archive" 22). For Mbembe, the archive conserves the past, not to save it, but to subdue it – especially in the case of the state-sanctioned archive – and the relationship to death is its foundation.

By death, Mbembe is partly referring to the fact that it is in death that a text is released from the individual to the collective, from the private sphere to the public. But perhaps more importantly, the archive's "trade with death" is part of its process of *taming* the past ("Archive"

22). A death disperses materials, but the archive gathers them back together. It does so in order to lay the dead to rest. Mbembe writes:

> The act of dying [...] never attacks totally, nor equally successfully, all the properties of the deceased [...] There will always remain traces of the deceased, elements that testify that a life did exist, that deeds were enacted, and struggles engaged in or evaded. Archives are born from a desire to reassemble these traces rather than destroy them. The function of the archive is to thwart the dispersion of these traces and the possibility, always there, that left to themselves, they might eventually acquire a life of their own. (22)

What the archive brings together – its "remains" or "debris" – is always at risk of spreading and gaining independent life ("Archive" 21-22). In short, Mbembe asserts that the archive's purpose is to stop the dead from irrupting into the present, to curb "the violence and cruelty of which the 'remains' are capable, especially when these are abandoned to their own devices" (21). For the state, which both relies on the past for its legitimacy, and must destroy that past to free itself from the debt it has incurred throughout its history, the archive represents both a promise and a threat. Rather than physically eradicating the archive, then, the state uses commemoration to anaesthetise it, creating the illusion of collective participation in and ownership of past actions. This ritual of commemoration, too, is a way to stop the remains from scattering.

The word "remains" appears in Jay Bernard's *Surge*, in a quotation from Londoner Nazanin Aklani, who lost her mother and aunt in the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017. Due to neglect and cost-cutting measures in the otherwise wealthy London borough of North Kensington, the fire in the high-rise spread with devastating rapidity, resulting in the deaths of seventy-two people of primarily working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds. Speaking to the host of BBC's *Newsnight*, as cited in *Surge*, Nazanin Aklani says: "You know, James, what's more horrendous than getting burned alive? You know, you ask yourself is there anything worse? And I'm afraid there is, you know. Having no remains" (44). Returning to Mbembe's definition of remains as the agential traces that survive a death makes this word especially resonant in the context of Bernard's poetry collection. There are indeed remains, and they shape not only the book itself, but also the city in which they

linger. The poem "Pem-People", for example, is named after the community space "where a memorial was held for Naomi Hersi, a black trans-woman who was found murdered in 2018" (*Surge* 55). The poem "Pace" is named for Thomas Crosby, "a young poet who passed in 2016" and whose "name and memory is spray painted on a shopfront in East London" (55). While gathering these remains, Bernard uses the ambiguities, silences and circularities of poetry to release the dead back into the world.

As mentioned earlier, *Surge* was written as a direct result of the author's residency in the George Padmore Institute in London, which collects "materials and documents relating mainly to black communities of Caribbean, African and Asian descent in post-war Britain and continental Europe" ("George Padmore Institute"). The Institute was founded by John La Rose, the first black publisher in Britain, and other activists and organisers in his circle. La Rose's publishing house, New Beacon Books, was central to the black British literary community, which was a vital part of broader community organising in the 1980s, including in the case of the New Cross Massacre. The archive is rooted in a set of politics that positions itself in opposition to the state, centring black radical and socialist politics. George Padmore, the Trinidadian activist after whom the Institute is named, was a Pan-Africanist and communist, and an important thinker and organiser in those movements.

With this context in mind, Mbembe's notion of the archive as a place where the debris is gathered so as not to stir up political unrest can appear less applicable – nor does the George Padmore Institute represent a state, quite the opposite. Mbembe does allow that the individual's encounter with the archive is complex, and that one's subjective experience of an archive depends on who owns it, "on whose authority they depend; the political context in which they are visited; the conditions under which they are accessed" (23). It is through the encounter with the archive that a *limit* is placed on its power and authority, which, regardless of any intended purpose, is derived from its status as an institution. Bernard expresses a similar ambivalence towards the archive in an interview with *Granta* magazine: "I started out feeling enchanted by the archives – feeling like I was making contact with history. But now I question the archives, I wonder what this impulse to preserve really means and I also question that initial enchantment"

("Interview"). That questioning is, perhaps, part of why *Surge* exists, and why it consistently pairs its interest in preservation with the impulse to problematise the act of preservation.

In the poem "Apple," a poet-turned-archivist examines a photograph of a birthday party celebrated in a house on Albert Road. The poet remarks on the mundanity of the occasion, focusing on a "particular apple" left "ageing on the plate," and notes that the photograph has been saved despite the fact that "there is nothing/ remarkable here, nothing that would/ startle a state" (29). Still, the poem begins with an announcement that is also an acknowledgment of why this image has been included in the first place: "And so, the revolutionary had a birthday party." It is the people involved in the occasion, not the occasion itself, who have been deemed important enough for inclusion. That acknowledgment counters the logic according to which the archive selects and discards pieces of the past with the logic of poetry. What appeals to the poet is what French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes, in his analysis of photography, calls the *punctum*: "[T]hat accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). In *Surge*, the poem seems to say, these people were included because of that darkening apple, not because of their oppositional relationship to the state.

Alongside Mbembe, another theorist who reacts to the complicated nature and status of the archive in relation to (black) life and death is Saidiya Hartman, in "Venus in Two Acts" (2008). Hartman's essay is a series of questions about how the archive can be employed within black studies. "Is it possible to [...] resurrect lives from the ruins?" asks Hartman, who is working with archives to unearth details of the transatlantic slave trade: "Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to 'exhume buried cries' and reanimate the dead?" (3). The archive with which Hartman is occupied is "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body," and one which turns lives into records, people into things, displaying the body while abstracting it (2). Delving into the New Cross Massacre, Bernard has to contend with similar problems – the newspaper articles exhibit corpses and numbers, while the poet has tasked themself with the vicissitudes of their potential reanimation.

Rather than answering her set of questions, Hartman repositions the present in relation to history and historiography, and, significantly, in relation to the future-to-come.

> As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing. (4)

Part of her argument is similar to one made by Jean Fisher in her analysis of The Black Audio Film Collective's juxtaposition of archival footage and testimonial memory in their films. There is no use of the archive that does not require interpretation, Fisher writes, and that interpretation exposes the archive as being "always in process," and always of the present (25). Arguably, this *history of the present* – and its anticipated futures – is precisely what Bernard responds to, not by attempting to resurrect the dead, but by interpreting their (archival and textual) remains through poetry. When Hartman suggests that writing about the archive may require "narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure" – allowing for "the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and the law" – she is, in part, asking us to approach the archive as poetry (12).

A spectral poetics of relation puts into play absences, invisibilities and opacities – like Glissant and Derrida, it indicates an ethical position towards the past and the future, the dead and the not-yet-born, on the basis of relationality. In the poem "Ark II," Bernard writes: "Night meets me near Ladbroke Grove / with a warm June morning in my hands / in the story I am trying to tell / what doesn't fit is part of the hole" (46). Bernard does not attempt to "fill in the gaps," because the whole necessarily always contains the hole, the inexplicable and unexplainable, the nothing that is still something; this pertains not just to the fire in New Cross, the cause of which has never been resolved, but to the entire history of black people in Britain. There can be no resolution – but there is and can be a future, one which arrives by returning, and which, according to Derrida, is constitutive of the archive. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida puts forward the idea that the archive is

structurally spectral, “a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met,” and that its matter is the future:

> The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise. (36)

If the archive’s foundation is death, it is a death that nevertheless contains traces of past life, and remnants of the future and the future-to-come. In that vein, *Surge* is not so much concerned with unearthing an answer or putting to rest the question, but with how the lives of the dead (as Hartman refers to them) can shape the politics and potentials of the future or futures – of a poem, a place, a body. What we catch a glimpse of in Bernard’s work with the archive is the time and place of justice, the messianic, which resists finality, closure and predictability, by never (but inevitably) arriving.

In an essay entitled “Jay Bernard’s *Surge*: Archival Interventions in Black British Poetry” (2021) Sarah Lawson Welsh also connects Bernard’s use of the archive with hauntology, writing: “Derrida argues that ‘the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production’” (6). Here, however, Welsh is actually quoting Mark Fisher’s “What is Hauntology?” (2012) rather than Derrida himself. While this description of the position of the future in hauntology is not in itself inaccurate, it is, as has been discussed in chapter one, only describing *one* future tense. The messianic is, again, absent from the analysis, leading Welsh to conclude that: “In *Surge*, even the unnamed victims of the New Cross and Grenfell fires achieve a kind of immortality… That is Bernard’s point: that history continues to haunt and be haunted until there is some form of justice, resolution or closure for the living *and* the dead” (26). Welsh frames “justice, resolution or closure” as interchangeable, but both Bernard and Derrida place justice in an entirely different and separate register. Terms such as *resolution* and *closure* presume that the dead are knowable, their desires transparent, and the crimes perpetrated against them possible to address within the law. More importantly, they are expressive of a sentiment

antithetical to hauntology – that the ultimate goal of speaking or sitting with the dead is to put an end to their hauntings.

Bernard states, in the interview in Granta, "I still find it very exciting, this task of making something out of pre-existing material." Bernard injects poetry – its irreducibility, its play – into the archive, making *something* out of the past, letting it interrupt and intervene in the present (while often writing in the present tense). Remaking this material also draws attention to that which is not included, the debris that archives can never contain – the opacity, the illegibility that is "antithetical to capitalism," from which both the spectral *and* poetry draw their power ("Venus" 12, 4). For Bernard, the fact that so much is absent from (and, of course, present in) the archive turns it into a creative resource. Speaking with fellow poet Kayo Chingonyi, they explained that *Surge* "is really a record of all of the readings I've done and conversations I've had, rather than being the crystallization of everything" (Chingonyi). *Surge*, which received the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, is also a show (called *Surge: Side A*, it was performed at the Roundhouse in 2017). It is a film, too, and, Bernard tells Chingonyi, "soon there's gonna be a sound piece." More than that, in my view, *Surge* is all the moments of its construction, its recorded and unrecorded conversations, its recorded and unrecorded performances, and all the things it will transform into in the future. Deliberately, it and Bernard gesture beyond its form as a poetry collection, undermining any potential claim to totality, while doing the same with and to the archive.

Black Lives, Black Matter

Alex Pascall, from the New Cross Fire Remembrance group, is quoted in *Surge*'s epigraph: "You've seen the physical. I was dealing with the opposite medium. I was in the belly of the beast..." For Pascall, the physical is the *opposite* of the belly of the beast, the latter a way to imagine the unfinished handling (and digestion) of disparate, dispersed information. In that realm, the human agent moves between the catastrophe, the tragedy, and the facts, combining them, reanimating them, and risking themselves in the process. Through Bernard, Pascall's words issue a challenge, suggesting to readers that this book may ask

them to do the same – to descend into the place where the material is still unassimilated, still unprocessed, and still being broken down. The first poem in *Surge* underscores this thematic point.

"Arrival" is the story of a beginning that is also an ending, a stopped start, which sees black people being forced into the logistics of racial capitalism – or "[falling] into the belly of the boat," to speak with Édouard Glissant, and "the belly of this boat dissolves you" (*Poetics* 6). For Bernard, in "Arrival" and throughout *Surge*, that moment of dissolution has consequences that begin with an exhortation to "remember," while simultaneously establishing a collective narrator. By the second line, we, the readers, are shown that an arrival is also always a transformation; one cannot appear somewhere without becoming something new, contained and categorised according to the schema of that other place:

> remember we were brought here from the clear waters of our dreams
>
> that we might be named, numbered and forgotten
>
> …………
>
> that they gave us their first and last names that we might be called wogs.
> (1)

This, the poem puts forward, is the purpose and process of dissolution: black people have been brought from "the clear waters of our dreams" to be turned into statistics, and "to their minds made flesh that it might be stripped from our backs." The abstract dream turns solid so that bodies can be made into flesh and figures. However, that transformation is not concluded, nor is it uncontested; in "Arrival," black people are figured as both spirit and body, the subject of the poem (its *we*) and its object (that which can be named and numbered). The purpose of being forced into visibility, to be named and subjected to name-calling, is, ultimately, to be contained and consumed. But being called into being also turns one into a consumer:

> kept hungry that we might cry in our children's sleep
>
> close our smoky mouths around their dreams

swallow them as they gaze upon us

never to be full –

snap, crackle

amen

Called into corporeality, the poem's "we" must "close our smoky mouths around *their* dreams" (emphasis added). "Their" may refer to either "our children" or "they" as extrapolated from previous lines. This confusion brings "we," "they" and "our children" into a complex relationship of unfulfilled consumption, with reality shaping ideology and vice versa. Removed from dreams, "we" are subjected to another fantasy, the deleterious myth of white supremacy – but that dream is also unsatisfactory, and so both "we" and "they" remain hungry.

On a similar note, Derek Hook, in "Racial Ontologising through the Body" (2021), argues in a reading of the work of South African scholar Charles Manganyi that the "black body" is typically called upon to be all that which is viewed as largely incompatible with the idea of the subject as shaped by notions of white supremacy. While I tend to avoid using "the black body" as a critical shorthand for black embodiment – without a contextualising discussion, it risks participating in the abstraction of the black subject it is intended to scrutinise – both Hook and Spillers, quoted below, use the term in relation to the systems of apartheid, colonialism and slavery that discursively produced it. "What is disagreeable about the bodily dimension of human existence," Hook points out, "is typically managed by projecting those features onto (cultural/racial) others. They have, or better yet, they *are* bodies; we, the superior group, transcend the merely bodily and attain the status of properly cultural beings" (111). Astutely, Hook stresses that the "merely bodily" is "the body's inevitable fate of decay and death, the body as itself waste-matter, as inescapable proof of finitude" (112). Bringing people out of their dreams, and into the naming and numbering logic of racial capitalism, involves creating a new form of embodiment, one that is more closely aligned with death. In Bernard's poetry,

black bodies are moved even closer to waste-matter – they are quite literally "made flesh." Bernard situates this racist embodiment within capitalist cultural production, turning the well-known television advertisement for Rice Krispies into a prayer. In *Surge*'s "Arrival," "snap, crackle, pop" becomes "snap, crackle/ amen", bringing together breakfast and black suffering, the "snap" and "crackle" now alluding to death through fire.

In her influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Hortense Spillers employs terms such as "flesh," "naming," and "numbering" to discuss the way in which slavery (its "American grammar" or symbolic system) has complicated, amongst other things, gender differentiation in black Americans. (The essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," mentioned in chapter four, also touches on that argument.) Spillers submits that for Africans, entry into the New World "marked a theft of the body," which, in turn, caused a loss of gender difference, as "the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific" (67). But in Spiller's view, the body is distinct from the flesh, and this distinction is "the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions" (67). Flesh is uniform, undifferentiated and exposed, removed from the "dimension of ethics" (68) – or, as Spillers explained in a 2017 lecture at the Barnard Center for Research on Women:

> I would associate bodiedness with juridical personality or the historical actor who has access to what our Fourteenth amendment would call due process… Flesh describes an alien… entity, a more or less expendable figure. Not only does the alien, by race or language or culture and custom, not have access to the protocols of due process, but perhaps its most poignant determination is the extent to which such a body cannot prevent or ward off another's touch. ("Shades of Intimacy")

Similarly, naming and numbering render subjects undifferentiated and expendable: the capturer has the power to un-and-rename the captured, which also serves to remove them from culture, language, and kinship systems. "The loss of the indigenous name," Spillers contends, "provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and cultural features and relations" (69, 73). So, too, do the ship's ledgers: "If in no other way, the destruction of the African name, of kin, of linguistic and

ritual connections is so obvious in the vital stats sheet that we tend to overlook it" (73). Reading "Arrival," it is difficult not to see Spillers' thesis enacted through Bernard's writing: newly named and numbered, captive bodies are unprotected, unindividuated, and banished to an outside, where bodiedness itself disintegrates. While Hook and Spillers use different theoretical frameworks and terminologies, their inquiry into the black body as matter or flesh, as more closely associated with the abject than the subject, appears to preoccupy Bernard, too. The body is captive to white supremacy, history, and ideology. The question "Arrival" seems to raise, through its depiction of the spectres of those who were "brought from the clear waters of [their] dreams," is whether the captive body, the real matter of the archive, can regain its subjectivity and agency through its encounter with another, allied agent.

Bernard's poem "Ark"[33] details the archival process, suggesting, as Mbembe does, that the way in which the archive collects debris can also become a method of controlling the past. The poem begins: "Now shall we consult the life of a stranger?/ Now shall we see what can and cannot be kept?" (*Surge* 2). In the archive, it seems, consulting someone's life and curtailing it is one and the same. The speaker's relationship to the archive is not condemnatory, but conflicted: the *ark* of the title implies that it also functions as a place of protection, with papers kept in archival boxes and files so that they can be salvaged, albeit in a changed form:

> I take this morning from its box, see how the years have warped
> its edges, its middle pages conjoined at the text.

Here, "this morning" is both the beginning of the speaker's working day *and* a morning long gone, the abstract and temporal materialising through touch. The words "edges," "pages" and "conjoined" with their shared affricate consonant (/dʒ/) in or close to the middle of the word, mimic the way in which the "middle pages" stick together, the physicality of the archived text echoed in the language of the poem. This stickiness becomes a self-reflexive allusion to the poem, which is divided into three sections, the first and final of which describe the poet's handling of the physical material, while the middle section makes the

33 I return to the various meanings of "ark" later in the text.

past present through the archivist's present-tense viewing of the material.

This is the kind of relationship between the archive and language – playful, creative, and associative – that arises through poetry, which has a different relationship to the archive than the archive has to reality. If poetry encourages linguistic play, excess, and openness in relation to reality, then the archive does the opposite, forcing the speaker to "wonder which words to file/the damp smoke and young bones under." The archive, "Ark" indicates, uses ostensibly objective words rather than poetry, burying the "young bones" in what Mbembe refers to as a "type of sepulchre" ("Archive" 22). In comparison to the archival box – which is also a coffin – the poet can act as a midwife for the dead, delivering the past and its multivocality anew:

> The year was still fresh,
> still screaming with its eyes closed,
>
> *Mi brudda dead, mi brudda dead, mi brudda dead-o*
> *Mi sista dead, mi sista dead, mi sista dead-o* (3)

Bernard describes the Black People's Day of Action, not as neutrally preserved in the archive, but as communicated through the poet doing (or imagining) the perceiving. That year, though long gone, is still "fresh" and accessible, not through the archive but through the archive in its encounter with the poet's creative reinterpretation. The italicised lines are sung in Bernard's live reading, which, again, conveys the inadequacy of even the written text in conveying (and containing) the material (Bernard, "Tracy K. Smith and Jay Bernard"). The speaker sees: "[A] crowd black as my hand gathered one morning/came over Blackfriars Bridge." In this line, their handling of the archive turns into a physical hand, which joins their body with the crowd, the present with the past, the first part of the poem with its conclusion. This is the materiality of the archive, as felt by the archivist and poet, and which brings about a sensual connection with the past that goes far beyond what Mbembe calls commemoration ("Archive" 24). The connection is further underlined by the same affricate consonant, / dʒ/, appearing here (in "bridge") as it does in the stuck-together "middle pages" of the text. In its final two lines, the section both undoes and repeats the gesture of "conjoining":

A white-sleeved hack hung from that ledge to better spit at
some kid who recalls it by their cup of archive wine.

The /dʒ/ of "ledge" uncouples the first line from the second, separating the "hack," hanging from a window, from the "kid", who is brought into the present tense and onto the ground, where the speaker also exists.

As the poem comes to its conclusion, the speaker "takes this January morning in my hands" – again, the contact is pointedly literal and tactile – and the speaker is faced with trying to fit reality into a classificatory system:

where to put the burning house, the child made ash, the brick in the back
of the neck, the shit in the letter box and piss up the side of it?

I file it under *fire*, *corpus*, *body*, *house*. (3)

How much of the terror of racism – the brutality of it – can be made safe through this type of work, the poem seems to ask, and to what purpose? Like Mbembe, Bernard seems to argue that the scattered remains ("the young bones," "the child made ash") are effectively repressed by the archive's naming and numbering. This has less to do with the purpose of this particular archive and more to do with how the institution has been constructed, how it places the past in relation to the present (and thereby to the future). Poetry has the potential to act differently. It revels in the multiplication of meaning, the strictly lexical being dismissed in favour of the lyrical. Thus, the final line proliferates rather than restrains connotations through its categorisations – "corpus" alludes to corpse, but also to collected knowledge on a subject, or the collected works of a particular author. All that can be written on or about this violence is, ultimately, derived from this corpse – a dead body, "flesh" and "waste-matter," that continues to act on and affect the writer (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 68; Hook 106).

The poems in *Surge* become densely populated and talkative. In "Patois," the speaker registers the way in which language spreads into the city and onto the streets, becoming its own kind of intricate poetry:

This century dubbed by migrants from the last.

We do not speak with one voice about one thing
Below the yellow, black and green flag of England. (4)

In addition to transforming on arrival, migrants have been transforming England in their turn, adding to its many voices, and exchanging its flag for Jamaica's. Here, "dubbed" also slyly references dub music and dub poetry, which, like patois, has spread and shaped the British literary tradition – including this poetry collection. Moreover, like the language of poetry, the language of the people is infinitely elastic, a living and moving thing in which those that came before (from the last century) are in dialogue with its current speakers.

If "Patois" is concerned with life, the following poem, "Harbour," speaks from a place of death and dying. In a conversation on *Surge*, Bernard shared that "Harbour" is a found poem, being a slight re-working of the comments made by a mother whose child was killed in the New Cross fire ("Jay Bernard x QMUL"). When she was first told about the disaster, she says:

I choked,

it closed in my throat,

          my voice it was weak,

so sickened, so grieved –

                    my voice became glass
          breaking in the heat (5)

Zig-zagging across the page, "Harbour" speaks in sing-song. Its interrupted tetrameter brings together awkward half-rhymes – "choked," "closed," "throat" and "weak," "grieved," "heat" – stressing the brittleness of the speaker's voice and the precariousness of the poem's integrity. Despite or because of that brittleness, it is the voice that dominates rather than the speaker. It is ascribed a series of emotive adjectives ("sickened," "grieved"). Only after it becomes "glass/breaking in the heat," can the speaker emerge from behind the voice:

I called

and no-one seemed to call with me

no-one seemed to know or see
what I had seen –

I was so sickened and so grieved

The title “Harbour” puts the poem in conversation with “Ark,” which, apart from referencing the archive, or Noah’s ark rescuing humanity from the flood, can also mean a place of safety, a shelter from the storm. This is when the archive can become a harbour, when it can house a lone, quavering voice that communicates an inarticulable grief. The speaker says:

Yvonne, jump, Paul, jump –

I said, I called – jump

Yvonne, jump Paul, jump – (6)

The repetition of “I called” signals words uttered too late, in the past tense – and yet, as an imperative, “jump” continues to act as a warning, a memory and a prediction, as the vulnerability of black children and teens in Britain continues to be a concern. “Harbour” becomes a communal voice, an unanchored one, which by necessity spreads and remakes itself around past tragedies and hazardous futures. Arguably, this is also the voice of an interminable mourning.

As discussed in chapter one, mourning, for Derrida, is without beginning or end. In *Specters of Marx*, he writes:

> It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead […] Now, to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies – for it must stay in its place. In a safe place […] Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one has to know who is buried where – and it is *necessary* (to know – to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there*. Let him stay there and move no more! (*Specters* 9)

But the spectre, of course, resists staying in place – its persistent absence/presence turns inheritance into a work of mourning that stretches into the future, and renders that future open to the promise. The spectre, which cannot be fully known, seen or banished, forces us to acknowledge that neither mourning nor justice has a limit. Bernard – like many of the writers included in this study – thematises the impossibility of "ontologizing remains" when writing about the history of the black diaspora. After all, what does one do when there are no remains, because the dead have been lost to fire or water?

In "Clearing," a ghost of the New Cross fire watches the police tidy away its corpse, observing that: "an officer circles the front yard leaning/ back to see the smoke/ or is it steam/ is it fire or water that can bring a child back" (12). In "Window," the speaker recalls an incident relayed in C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), during which an enslaved boy demonstrates to his companions how to die in the fire to which they have been condemned:

> When we realised it was only we who remained
> he called to us in Creole, "You do not know how to die. See how to die."
>
> ....
>
> By a great effort he twisted his body in his bonds, sat down,
> and placing his feet in the flames, let them burn without uttering a groan.
> (20)

The speaker of the poem vacillates between being in the scene as a companion of the boy and watching him from afar, finally placing him alongside Gaius Mucius Scaevola, a Roman youth condemned to death for the attempted assassination of an Etruscan king. Scaevola's bravery – calmly sticking his hand into the fire to demonstrate to the Etruscans how little he feared death – earned him his freedom. Yet the poem remarks that the enslaved boy is "'[g]reater than Mucius Scaevola'," whose "smooth white body is in the Louvre, turning, saying, /'How cheap the body is to men'" (20). Not only did Mucius Scaevola survive his ordeal – "*[h]is* smooth white body" is preserved, fixed in a portrait, while the nameless, dead boy in Bernard's poem is "half smoke...

floating away" (19). While Mucius Scaevola is rendered immortal and unchanging, only rumours and words remain of the boy; he can rise and disappear from the poem, not as a corpse, but as a spectre. If the captive body is made flesh and removed from the realm of ethics, as per Spillers, Bernard posits that, in contact with poetry, it can be returned to it. In "Chemical," the speaker describes the victims of Grenfell: "rose-hot capillaries/ ignite the dead's ragged cloth and unshrooms/ them to gas" (47). Through fire, flesh becomes air – there can be no burial, no "safe place" where this body may rest and remain.

In both "Clearing" and "Window," the remains cannot be gathered together because the very circumstances of their becoming is an act of violent dissolution. Both the speaker in "Clearing" and the enslaved boy at the stake are smoke, neither reducible solely to concrete matter – flesh – nor to spirit. "Hiss" makes a similar point, but in relation to a black diasporic history with water as point of passage and place of burial (25). After the firefighters have departed, entering the house at New Cross is "like standing on a black beach/ with the sea suspended in the walls" (25). Serendipitously, Bernard's black beach reaches back to Glissant's: a dark shoreline of enigmatic encounters that, through ambivalent and mute interaction, opens up relation:

> You kick the weeds and try to piece it back.
> Fractured shell? A bone? Bloated antennae?
> Flesh thigh spindle, gangrenous pet fish?
> An eye or a tiny glaring stone? A seal's tongue?
> Or the sour sinew yoking front and hind fin?
> Vertebrae or fetters? Bedsheet or slave skin? (25)

The confusion between sea creatures and human remains becomes gradually more vivid and visceral, from "bone" to "sour sinew," until finally slavery is explicitly evoked. The remains of slavery are impossible to salvage, and the impulse to parse them is, if inescapable, ultimately pointless. The state of uncertainty can inhabit the observer, "asking *whatitwas whatitwas whatitwas*," but the lost, disassembled and fragmented bodies are "no longer of [...] the order of knowledge," but of another realm entirely (Derrida, *Specters* 217).

Surge places the language of poetry – its shifting and expansive lyrical I/we, its formal and linguistic experimentation and its excesses

of sound and meaning – in opposition to the language of ordering, knowing and owning. The development of that lyrical language is democratic, associative and ungovernable; it exceeds one single form or body, defying categorisation, "legibility and the law" (Hartman, "Venus" 12). The language of poetry is specifically tied to the nature of the remains that Bernard chooses to gather: lost and fugitive, unrecoverable and partially unburied. They cannot "*remain there*," because "what remains" is, at times, "no remains" (*Specters* 9; *Surge* 44). For that reason, the remains must necessarily move beyond the archive, beyond the book, to readers. If the archive is figured as a sepulchre, one disturbed by its encounter with poetry, then the book is, in its turn, disturbed by its encounter with readers, through whom a perennial process of remembrance and mourning is generated.

The matter of the body becomes particularly important in Bernard's poem "Songbook," which is written in conversation with Linton Kwesi Johnson's "New Crass Massahkah" (*Surge* 7; *Revalueshanary Friend* 52). Composed shortly after the deaths of the young people in the New Cross fire, "New Crass Massahkah" begins with six stanzas, the first three of which describe the party at Yvonne Ruddock's house – "di dubbin/ and di rubbin/ and di rackin to di riddim" – while the final three depict the fire breaking out. After that, the form changes, and another speaker emerges, reflecting on the aftermath of the fire. In recordings of the poem, the music abruptly stops when the new speaker comes forwards, and the words are spoken into an abrupt, sobering silence. As Marta Fernández Campa points out, the "sudden halt in the music transitions the poem into a quiet reading that highlights the terror and shock in British Black communities across the country" (209). Jay Bernard's "Songbook," like Johnson's poetry, is written in patois, exploring the same joy turning into horror as bodies turn into ash, "black smoke ah rise tho dem nevah did know" (7). Bernard's speaker, like Johnson's, is watching this unfold, a disembodied presence at the scene of the fire. But choosing to write in patois does more than simply recall the matter of Johnson's poem; it also recalls his particular way of emphasising action and embodiment.

As discussed in chapter three, Johnson habitually uses wordplay, based on his own distinctive spelling, to animate the words on the page, unsettling them from previously settled meanings. "Crass" in "New Crass Massahkah" can be read as alluding not only to "cross," but also

to the "crassness" of the ensuing investigation. Johnson also animates the poems on stage through performance, infusing the text with new and changing sounds, intonations and actions. His writing is always restless, on the page and as performed on the stage, and restlessness is, if we look to "Ark," what must be brought into the archive so as to animate it politically.

Like "New Crass Massakah," "Songbook" can be performed. In a recording of Jay Bernard reciting "Songbook" on YouTube, the poem is sung, the text given what Lawson Welsh identifies as a "dancehall or mento rhythm" (Bernard, "Penguin Random House"; Lawson Welsh 21). In Bernard's performance, there "is no pause separating song from poem, also no music […] but musicality, cadence, and rhythm are carried throughout in ways that powerfully reach audiences and create a musicality of its own," as Fernández Campa notes (210). Without Bernard's physical presence, the poem is different – not reduced, but read rather than seen. This again raises the question of the body's place in the archive, described by Hartman as "a display of the violated body" ("Venus" 2). But "Songbook" also offers up another body – the body of the text in relation to the body of the poet, to "illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead" ("Venus" 4). Death may be the basis of the archive, but the dead are still alive, existing in parallel rather than chronological time. Again, what Hartman terms a history of the present is reminiscent of Johnson's figuring of history as "the unbearable weight of the present" ("Rebel Music" 402) – and Hartman's refusal of closure, as thematised by Bernard, is closely aligned with Derrida's conception of the messianic, the future-to-come.

In the introduction to *Surge*, Bernard writes "I am haunted by this history but I also haunt it back" (xi). The poet is writing in the company of ghosts when working with the archive, effectively travelling in time; *they* become the ghost, that which first appears by coming back, the force in the future that has already shaped (and been shaped by) the past. As Derrida asserts, "haunting is historical […] but it is not dated" (*Specters* 3). Likewise, Bernard offers an interpretation of haunting "[as] the future": "[The] ghost is an indication of some future thing that you need to be aware of […] Also […] there are other forms of time where people walk backwards into the future" (Marks). Perhaps to walk backwards into the future is to move as the dead do – to be a part of the past that is continually emerging.

If history can be haunted back by the ghosts of the living, it can be claimed and reclaimed by them for a variety of ideologically inflected ends. Rejecting the neat distinction between the living and the dead recognises that potential danger. Bernard, like Walter Benjamin, highlights the vulnerability of the dead (Benjamin 255), and the need to defend and redeem them on the basis of a shared community, history, and future. As Victoria Adukwei Bulley points out, in *Surge*, "[t]here are no platitudes to be made about the dead being free from suffering whilst loved ones fight for justice in their wake" ("Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critic Review"). The poems "+" and "-", for example, are paired. The first is another found poem, based on an interview with one of the fathers of a victim of the New Cross fire. That interview, now in the George Padmore Institute's archive, was conducted by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee, in direct response to unsatisfactory police interviews; as such, it serves as a counternarrative to the reports made by the state. On the next page, "–" is the dead boy's response to his father's past-tense narration: "don't bury me," the boy pleads, "I can barely stand it when the lights go off" (14).

Held up to the light, and printed on the reverse page, "–" becomes a palimpsest to "+" – the dead voice is beneath and a part of the living voice.[34] This way of physically bringing the texts together rejects burial, while understanding that the danger of burial is always imminent; the past can still be killed, and the future truncated, if we allow the antagonistic, living ghosts of the present to dictate or shut down history. Undefended, celebrated revolutionaries can still be turned into terrorists, and dead black boys into criminals. As Hartman writes in "Venus in Two Acts":

> If this story of Venus has any value at all it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers. A relation which others might describe as a kind of melancholia, but which I prefer to describe in terms of the afterlife of property, by which I mean the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril. (13)

[34] Speaking on these poems in the interview with *Granta*, Bernard remarks that placing them back to back was intentional, "but the fact that they are printed on the reverse of each other is an accident of the printing process." They add that it is a fortunate accident precisely because of the way in which one can be viewed through the other "if you hold it up to the light."

Attachment to the past does not need to be melancholic, subversive or otherwise, but can instead be figured as a way to attend to remains that cannot (and should not) be ontologized or stilled. It is in this context that the narrators of *Surge*, both living and dead, appear highly vulnerable, as dead or dying victims of violence and fire and flood. But they are also very much alive. One watches his head being put into a plastic bag, another (in "Peg") revels in the erotic possibilities of queer embodiment and togetherness, even in the shadow of death. They are allowed "shrieks" and "moans," to make the "black noise" that Hartman considers essential to an ethical, meaningful exchange with the archive (12). *Surge* reveals that poetry can be used to release the remains (Hartman's detritus) from the sepulchre, allowing the dead to trouble the living – and the other way around – for a long time.

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Jay Bernard's *Surge* stages a multivalent, polyvocal encounter with the archive, in which its relationship to death is consistently challenged by its active transformation into a poetry collection. Cathie Kanagavalli Lakshmi Jayakumar-Hazra argues that:

> [b]y creating a counter-narrative that reinstates the significance of Black lives, Black protest movements, and Black queer identity and politics... Bernard encourages readers to experience, via the poet's reverence for archival documents, their significance in a work of imagination as a way to fully grasp the history and legacy of race relations in Britain. (7)

While there is much to agree with in Jayakumar-Hazra's analysis, I object to framing *Surge* as reverential in its treatment of the archive, or that it presents the archive as a way to "fully grasp" racial oppression. Bernard's attitude towards the archive is more complicated than this statement suggests, allowing that the archive cannot easily be remade into a solid foundation for a counter-narrative in a British discourse about race and racism, unless the poetry based on it is simultaneously regarded as a counter-narrative to the archive as an instituting imaginary.

Surge's lyrical intervention into the archive of the New Cross fire stages capture and release, a double movement that makes space for the work of interminable mourning, which is also the work and responsibility of inheritance. The remains of which Mbembe write do not remain in *Surge*, but transform into smoke and float into a future that remains unimaginably open.

Repetition and First Time: Concluding Remarks

> The future can only be for ghosts. And the past.
> – Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

This study began by acknowledging that séances invite failure. Fortunately, failure is what allows ghosts to slip away from us and into the world, where their effects may be terrifying and transformatory. If, by attempting to conjure these texts' latent ghosts, I have deprived them of some of their power – if the séance turned into an exorcism along the way – I can only hope that my failure will allows those spirits to act more turbulently.

At its core, this project submits that black Britishness has been rendered spectral in most writing produced in and about hauntology in Britain, and attempts to offer a constructive corrective. After all, as Toni Morrison writes, "We can agree [...] that invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum" (11). My contention has been that the reason behind this particular (visible) invisible thing is the popularisation of a Fisherian definition of hauntology over a Derridean one, and the decontextualised reinterpretations of Fisher that have followed. They tend to stress the spectre's relationship to the past, and the potentialities still inscribed in past moments, while the spectre is figured as a remnant of that still-trembling, dead-and-alive instant; it is what could have been, not necessarily what may still be, nor the promise that exists beyond it. Additionally, that spectre is often geographically circumscribed, local rather than global, and removed from the transcultural and transhistorical cross-currents of the black Atlantic.

As I have suggested, the past is a more problematic prospect for many black writers in the diaspora; their relationship to it is rarely constituted through the hauntological melancholia Fisher proposes. Nevertheless, in the poets I have studied, the past is recovered and reimagined to intuit radically new futures and freedoms. In Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, the dead and the living recognise each other as comrades, vowing to meet each other again in better times; Jackie Kay's enslaved women tell their story as a

collective, watching the reader or listener from behind their sail/veil (or shroud) and anticipating our response. Sulter's self-fashioning resists the spectralisation of black women, while her imagined Africa disinters a past future that may yet come, and Bernard's *Surge* allows the archival remains to stir and lift like smoke.

What I hope to have accomplished in this study is to broaden the idea of how British writers engage with hauntology as a "focal [point] for conceptual or theoretical activity" (Derrida, *Specters* 235). Many of the conceptual or theoretical metaphors that have emerged through my readings of these four poets' texts have been oceanic: the ship, the wake, the open boats, the sail turned veil, and the black beach. A hauntological logic operates through and erodes these motifs, rendering them porous and open to creative and critical transformation.

What does it mean, then, to follow the ghost? Turning to poetry, I have argued that Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation is haunted, and that its relationality, born through death in the black Atlantic, can guide open, dynamic readings of poetry's spectral temporalities and absent-and-present connections. Evolution, opacity, errantry and expansion encourage us to approach the world relationally, which is to say hauntologically; accordingly, "the dialectics between the oral and the written," or the rapport between "the present moment and duration" (Glissant, *Poetics* 31), refocuses spectral slippages and syntheses.

To follow ghosts into poetry is to be attentive to the textual openings that let spirits arrive and depart; it is also to understand that intimations of better worlds can enter through what Robin D.G. Kelley calls "poetic knowledge," seeing traces of the future in the current moment (9). Poetic knowledge is not necessarily limited to poetry, though poetry provides us with a way into it; rather, it can manifest in social movements, in meetings and manifestoes, wherever the spectre can and does return (for the first time).

Fundamentally, Derridean hauntology destabilises ontology, reminding us that, when something is made flesh, some *other* is spectralised. In a very real, material sense, hauntology confronts us with the limits of the living present, and the limitations of the law, instead offering us a vision of an ethical *relation* to that which exists behind and beyond the moment as is. Perhaps to follow the ghost is "[to] be just: beyond the living present in general" (Derrida, *Specters* xix).

To be just. The poems included in this study follow their ghosts – victims of colonialism, slavery, capitalism and imperialism, of gendered and sexual oppression – to their graves, to water and fire, in acts of profound poetical knowledge and solidarity. What I have argued is that the textual strategies in these poems, while often describing horrific trauma, are not necessarily *themselves* indicative of trauma; they are often circular, but not repetitive, and they tend to point away from the page and into the (opening) world. Read as hauntological interventions, the texts do not merely explicate the past, or ask us to remember it; they tell us that the spectre inhabits the temporality of justice, that the "future is its memory," and that those memories can unsettle the present (Derrida, *Specters* 45). It is our responsibility to enable that just future, with the understanding that it can never do anything but promise; that justice is a process without end, but one that has numerous beginnings.

The question of black British hauntology, then, is not one of inclusion and representation. It is a question of understanding hauntology as a way of apprehending *new* rather than *lost* futures during a time of intensifying ideological and physical attacks against migrants from across the political spectrum; a time when those arrested are the protesters against, rather than the instigators of, the Israeli genocide in Gaza; and during a time when Britain has the highest wealth gap in the "developed world" (the US, as always, excepted) (Hutton). Responding to the exigencies of globalised racial capitalism is not far from Derrida's original purpose in *Specters of Marx*: to answer the question "Whither Marxism?" How does the promise of Marx, the emancipatory promise, reach us in times of crisis, and how does it spur us into action? Fredric Jameson points out, through Walter Benjamin, that the messianic is not evoked "in a genuinely revolutionary period, a period in which changes can be sensed at work all around you," but when there is no hope, and no light (62). In those moments, the more-to-come opens up the very idea of the future, and of futurity itself, through a promise that compels action. All that is asked of us is that we attend to that promise. Or, in the words of Linton Kwesi Johnson (*Selected Poems* 61):

> tomorrow a stranger will enter
> my hut my cave my cool cavern of gloom
> I will give him bread

he will bring good news from afar
I will give him water
he will bring a gift of light.

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Ghosts of the Black Atlantic

This book examines mourning, spectrality, and ethics in the work of four black British poets, rethinking hauntology through black British and diasporic literary practice. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx, it challenges uses of hauntology that emphasise the past–present relationship while overlooking questions of futurity and justice.

Situating these poets within Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic, the study develops a "spectral poetics of relation" to analyse works by Jay Bernard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jackie Kay, and Maud Sulter. It argues that Black British poetry reorients hauntology towards the future-to-come, offering new ways of imagining justice amid the enduring spectres of empire.

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